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Art by: **LeSean Thomas**



## Letter from the Editor

### This and that…

Couple of things to tackle this month: First, I'd like to address concerns regarding my recent misgivings about Nintendo's Wii plans. If I came across as anti-casual games, I'm not. I don't care for them personally but as a demographic I see casual gamers as a great new resource for publishers to tap into. My beef with Nintendo is the decision to focus on casual gaming at the expense of the fans that have stood by them since the beginning. At a time when Nintendo should be beefing up their first-party arsenal to meet the demands of the millions of gamers who purchased a Wii for the brands they love, they've all but said thanks for the memories. The casual focus doesn't bother me as a part of the equation; I'm concerned over a severe lack of first- party development and a glut of sub-standard ports. Having seen what the console is capable of with Super Mario Galaxy, it pains me that Nintendo hasn't announced a formidable new game in almost two years. Doesn't it bother you? After Metroid Prime 3: Corruption, Battalion Wars 2, and Super Mario Galaxy, then what? There are a few good 3rd party games in the offing but compared to the 360 and PS3, the Wii forecast is cloudy with a slight drizzle. Where's No More Heroes for instance? Here's a triple-A sandbox game that's near complete and Nintendo hasn't picked it up? Has anyone? Why not commission Treasure for another Wario or at least a Sin and Punishment redux? …Something. I love Nintendo and I love my Wii. I just don't want it to become the next GameCube. I carp because I care.

Onto E3 Lite…While this year's show did address the issue of overcrowding and getting real time with the games and developers, unless they're planning on renting us all Segways, there's still some work to do. July is also a bit late in the year. By the time the show rolled around we'd seen 95% of what was on hand. But not to worry, I have it all figured out. Having just rolled in from Comic-Con a few hours ago I have to say that San Diego has this convention thing down. Facing record attendance and American Idol sign-ins just a few miles away at Qualcomm stadium, the city still managed to keep things moving and casualty free. An industry-only May E3 at the San Diego Convention Center, especially with all the new hotels springing up, is the ultimate solution for E3s future.

You're now free to roam about the issue.

**Dave Halverson** Editor In Chief


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Official Xbox Magazine

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XBOX 360 LIVE

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The shadow you cast is the shadow they fear.

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MISTWALKER

TEEN

T

Alcohol Reference
Crude Humor
Fantasy Violence
Mild Language
Mild Suggestive Themes

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Atrocities
Repugnance
Intestines
Annulment
No Matter
You Were,
We Are
All The
Nullification
Butchery
Depletion
Smoldering
Blight
Fangs
Overwhelming Anxiety
Desanguination
Open Wounds
Appendectomy
Abomination
Ligaments
Shrapnel
Bludgeoning
They Will
Not Stop
Until
Humanity Is
A Stain
On
The
Pavement.
Lost Souls
Plague
Your
Greatest
Achievement
Will Be
Survival.
Brains
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Malady
Puncturing
Hysteria
Woe
Wreckage
Delirium
Infections
Zombie Summoners
Constant Pain
Laceration
Soot
Suffocation
Eternal Darkness
Necrosis
Local Swelling
Grievous Injury
Distress
First
They
Take
The
City.
Rot
Angst
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Grotesque
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Dislocation
Your
Last
Hope
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No Matter Which You
Choose, The Odds Are
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NPD Group

# database

september 2007

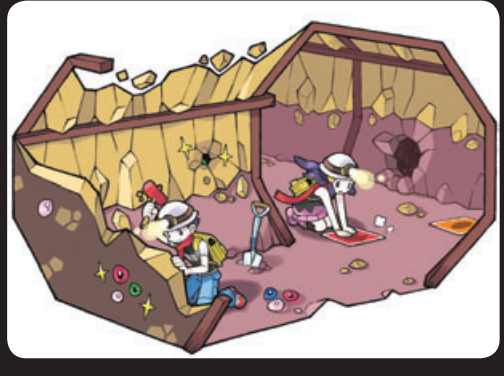
## Year to Date madness

**Console Hardware:** $1.7 Billion 2006 YTD: $853 Million
**Portable Hardware:** $654 Million 2006 YTD: $516 Million
**Hardware total:** $2.3 Billion 2006 YTD: $1.37 Billion
**Console Software:** $2.1 Billion 2006 YTD: $1.7 Billion
**Portable Game Software:** $802 Million 2006 YTD: $595 Million
**Video Game Accessories:** $859 Million 2006 YTD: $551 Million

| SYSTEM | JUNE HARDWARE SALES |
|---|---|
| PlayStation 3 | 98,500 |
| Xbox 360 | 198,400 |
| Nintendo Wii | 381,800 |
| Nintendo DS | 561,900 |
| PSP | 290,100 |

| TOP 10 GAMES TO DATE 2007 | SYSTEM |
|---|---|
| Pokemon Diamond | NDS |
| Wii Play w/remote | Wii |
| Pokemon Pearl | NDS |
| God of War II | PS2 |
| Guitar Hero 2 w/guitar | PS2 |
| Guitar Hero 2 w/guitar | Xbox 360 |
| Mario Party 8 | Wii |
| Crackdown | Xbox 360 |
| Diddy Kong Racing | NDS |
| Legend of Zelda: Twilight | Wii |

| TOP 20 GAMES OF JUNE 2007 | SYSTEM |
|---|---|
| Mario Party 8 | Wii |
| Wii Play w/remote | Wii |
| Pokemon Diamond | NDS |
| Pokemon Pearl | NDS |
| Forxa Motorsport 2 | Xbox 360 |
| Guitar Hero 2 w/guitar | PS2 |
| Guitar Hero 2 w/guitar | Xbox 360 |
| Pokemon Battle | Wii |
| Resident Evil 4 | Wii |
| The Darkness | Xbox 360 |
| Naruto Ultimate Ninja 2 | PS2 |
| Transformers The Game | PS2 |
| Tenchu Z | Xbox 360 |
| New Super Mario Bros. | NDS |
| Tomb Raider Anniversary | PS2 |
| Super Paper Mario | Wii |
| Transformers the Game | Xbox 360 |
| MLB '07 The Show | PS2 |
| Big Brain Academy | Wii |
| DIRT | Xbox 360 |



# playback

September 2007

letters@playmagzine.com

## LETTER OF THE MONTH

I believe the nature of the videogame medium prevents it from moving beyond craftsmanship to the stature of art... Videogames represent a loss of those precious hours we have available to make ourselves more cultured, civilized, and empathetic.

This, said by movie critic, Roger Ebert.

It is hard indeed to convince someone who does not play video games that the latter cannot be art.

I'll not even list such obvious examples as Shadow of the Colossus or Okami, as gamers themselves can see past what passes off as stereotypical art.

Now do not get me wrong, those games are wonderful in themselves, but the point is, many, many other video games present an artistic element, which may not be as subtle as those previously mentioned, but which are undeniable once recognized.

Anyone ever played through Silent Hill, for example? Everything about it is art, from the imagery, the creation of lucid atmosphere, to the gameplay and its key elements.

Many video games realize a form of art or another, and not just with their pretty graphics or melodic scores (which are still more then valid, in my opinion), but with their gameplay mechanics, the setting of atmosphere or the ability to draw in a player with its story. Who will not agree that the plots in games like Metal Gear solid or Final Fantasy are not so well worked upon, that the games themselves are often recognized for such a strong point?

The Castlevania series accomplishes a stature of art not merely for its very unique traits, its assortment of mythological references or the ability to portray the vampire mythos much like one would read about in a Sheridan Le Fanu tale, or again, Bram Stoker's famous Dracula (Duh), but comically enough, for its cavalcade of success and failures the series has seen in its career.

It sounds stupid, but many will indeed say that art is spontaneous and the creator does not create something, but simply digs it up somewhere.

Van Gogh slit his damned ear off, and now look at him. The comically drawn chain of events which led him to become famous can almost be regarded in the same way for many video game series, and I am sure that such trite claims as I have quoted above pretty much only refer to fruit basket and flower vase contemporary art.

Urban Champion does for video gaming what Mortician did for the metal scene, ha ha.

Speaking of old games, I am not merely talking about recent and current generations, oh no. I do believe that older games, such as all the classics we have grown up with like Super Mario Bros or Street Fighter have greatly helped to pave the way to an artistic form of entertainment. Why did people get hooked playing R-Type? Because of the unique gameplay.

I must stress once more, the way certain gameplay is presented and flows, the execution of such, in my opinion, is art in itself.

Someone may string up dead rabbits on metal wires in various patterns: will people enjoy it? Not likely, but it is still art.

Ok, fine. perhaps art is a hard thing to define...as we are all stuck with out opinions, as no absolute answer exists. Some say it is a manifestation of one's emotions, others say it is the ability to, simply, create.

So, if that cannot pass as a legitimate statement, allow me to elaborate upon the following: culture? Videogames do not aspire to cultural enlightenment?

Final Fantasy Tactics had such an interesting plot, that I was fascinated and had decided to look into religious history, for nothing but mine own INTEREST.

If I did not play any Final Fantasy games, I would not have been inspired to research Norse mythology, if I did not play Shadow Hearts, I would not have discovered anything about who Roger Bacon or Grigori Rasputin were.

Many games are an abundant source of all sorts of references to life, mankind's history and mythology, and I find this amazing and entertaining.

I do not know if it can truly culture someone with its sole presentation, but I know that films cannot do any better.

And while I am on the subject...civility?! What in Imothep's rusty scythe does he mean by THAT?

I know that everyone wants to believe that nobody would ever be going postal if it were not for video games, however I highly doubt one cannot look at violent films as well, if not even more, when making such an ignorant statement.

If anything, video games help to relieve my stress and my anger in a healthy way, which might prevent me from going in some shopping mall and doing it in a very less then healthy way.

Phooey.

I do believe that films and literature are great ways to become more diverse and cultured; but I do not agree that video games should be excluded. Did *Gladiator* really teach anyone anything about Roman history? If you were interested in such because of the movie, you had to go and read a book or check out a site on the net to learn more, and video games are equal in this matter. That is, without counting the almost "myth" this medium might be recognized with for its methods of execution such as gameplay, interactivity, plot and atmosphere, or the sprinkling of mythology and references to other events, real or not...

If people were willing to look past the gore, the redundant idea that video games are ''repetitive" and offer no original concept, or give children bad influences, they might actually not go through life believing that the Necronomicon is actually locked up somewhere in the Vatican.

Jesus Christ.

Thank you for your time.
Gisèle Chicoine

# Iron and the Maiden

**The dog's finally out of the bag**

Ever wonder what Naughty Dog co-founder Jason Rubin has been up to since moving from the game sector to the private sector back in 2004? Well, all was revealed at this year's Comic-Con. Sitting down with Jason for an upcoming feature interview, not only were we treated to a glimpse of his latest project—the new Aspen Comics series Iron and the Maiden—but we were also given some insight as to where things might go from here now that the cat is out of the bag. "I definitely have a master plan" said Jason, when asked (poked and prodded) about the many paths available for such a promising new IP. "Brands like 300 and Sin City have really opened a lot of doors."
Jak and Daxter this isn't. Iron and the Maiden pits the Syndicate, headed up by über boss Big Daddy (who makes Scarface look like mother Theresa) against The Order (organized religion—be afraid) set in an alternative future of his own design that fuses 1930s architecture with some incredibly cool neo-retro technology. Married with characters designed by Joe Madureira and Jeff Matsuda, it's what cross-over dreams are made of. To get a taste, pick up volumes 1 & 2 (www.ironandthemaiden.com), read in complete disbelief as you soak in the shock and awe of the premiere issue, and then sit back and ponder what it might feel like as a GTA-style sandbox game or feature film…or both. Stay tuned.

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"...designed by Joe Madureira and Jeff Matsuda, it's what cross-over dreams are made of."

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# Hip to be square

**Lego my Fedora!**

Lucas Arts and Traveller's Tales recently announced LEGO Indiana Jones The Videogame (working title) for a summer 2008 release across next-gen consoles in concert with the forever awaited new feature film. Developed by the same team at Traveller's responsible for the immensely successful LEGO Star Wars games, the Indy Jones game will present a tongue-in- cheek approach to the first three cinematic adventures: *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark, Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* and *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*.

# Propaganda

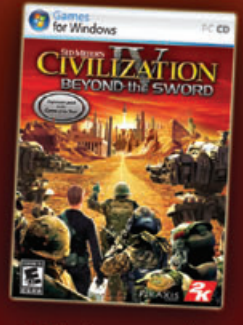
State of the union….

Microsoft recently fired their cannons across Nintendo's bow, no doubt in response to their claims of market supremacy, touting brisk sales. Microsoft sold 197,000 360 consoles in June compared to 135,000 units in May, widening their worldwide installed base for next-gen consoles with more than 11.6 million 360 consoles sold (across 37 countries). According to NPD, three of the top 10 games in June were Xbox 360 games or exclusives, including Forza Motorsport 2, Guitar Hero II, and The Darkness, marking 22 appearances for third-party titles on Xbox 360 to break the monthly top-10 best-selling games list in the past nine months. Microsoft also announced a new partnership with The Walt Disney Studios to deliver an extensive catalog of new and classic movies, including titles from Walt Disney Pictures, Pixar, Touchstone Pictures, Hollywood Pictures and Miramax Films, to the Xbox LIVE Marketplace.

Meanwhile sales of the Wii recently passed the eight million mark, although precious new software announcements may slow things down in the months ahead, as Sony's PS3 approaches the four-million mark with a head of steam going into Q4 behind a string of first-party powerhouses (Heavenly Sword, Eye of Judgment, Ratchet & Clank and Uncharted) and a price drop. At the end of the day though, handhelds still rule the roost. DS sales are fast approaching the 45 million worldwide mark, with PSP sales around half that. Seems like Microsoft needs a handheld…

CIV® GOES BIG

How huge is Civ IV: Beyond the Sword™? The new Gettysburg Address has three zip codes, yo.

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Games for Windows
2K

# Heaven on Earth Heavenly Sword

words Dave Halverson

My crusade for the first hands-on Heavenly Sword cover came to a head late last year only to be dashed when Ninja Theory wisely decided to keep a lid on things a bit longer. But my Mom always said that good things come to those who wait and I guess she was right. Either that or she didn't have the money for the GI Joe with the kung fu grip.

Shrouded in mystery, Heavenly Sword is one of very few games where nobody really knows what to expect. The grandiose Dynasty Warriors-like segments on display certainly appear breathtaking and the arena battles are obviously brilliantly choreographed, but what lies in between? Is it God of War-like, or strictly a next-generation hack 'n' slash? Well, I'm here to shine a big bright light on the whole game; top to bottom; start to finish. I didn't just play Heavenly Sword—I studied it. And when I fixate on a game I go deep, deep undercover.

As I touched on in last month's single-level preview the first thing that strikes you about Heavenly Sword is an unfathomable level of detail and facial expression. I'm not sure if it's just brilliant programming or the cell processors at work, but you've never seen such drama portrayed in a game. Not just the cosmetics of the face but the way the lips, teeth, tongue, eyes, eyelids, brow and cheeks appear and move. With Heavenly Sword the term "cinema" becomes passé. The game *is* cinema as it seamlessly blends action and drama. The acting is the best I've experienced in a game, easily on par with a good film. When Flying Fox first appears and begins his discourse—"you are fuuulll of spirit, you are fuuull of passion"—I challenge you to compare it to any scene in any game... and the animation, well, it's almost not: The people in Heavenly Sword simply move like people. We're into entirely new worlds here, although it does come at a price.

But for now, let's focus on the gameplay. Heavenly Sword draws no comparison with Dynasty Warriors or Ninety Nine Nights. The massive battle aspect is minor at best—a single setting that frames the straightforward yet brilliantly executed story told through a series of flashbacks covering a span of four days.

Much more diverse than anyone expected, Heavenly Sword is also surprisingly divided between two

characters. The breathtaking Nariko plays the lead but her sister, the playful cat-like Kai (whom you *will* fall madly in love with) also plays a vital role in the game as the clan's archer and Nariko's closest ally. Much of the game outside of the fighting revolves around manipulating first-person projectiles—shooting and then guiding shields, arrows and cannon fire via the SIXAXIS controller into various switches or bodies. Granted, it's been done before but never to this degree or level of satisfaction. Kai's role in the game (a bit of the old Twing Twang) is wonderfully exhilarating. Beginning with a simple sniping exercise where every kill feels all too good, you soon find yourself playing dual roles, as Nariko and Kai cooperate in a single scene. It's brilliant, generously *not* timed, and choreographed to such perfection that you might find yourself actually laughing inside thinking, "This is just too good. I cannot believe what I am playing."

The battles—which you've all seen and undoubtedly studied—revolve around a very clever system that rewards the player for performing combos and precision timing. If you posses mad fighting skills prepare to be spoiled like Paris Hilton at her sweet sixteen. Nariko possesses three Heavenly stances: speed, range and power, which counter her combatant's corresponding aura—blue for speed, orange for power, and red for unblockable moves that must be avoided (Nariko can roll with the right analog). Nariko blocks automatically when she's using the matching color and can counter with the triangle button by perfectly timing attacks, often resulting in dramatic one-hit kills. Those are the basics, although it runs much deeper. Swiping in range mode for instance sends characters flying upward, after which a flick of the SIXAXIS sends Nariko airborne to perform stunning aerial combos, or by filling up a tiered disc, she can unleash SuperStyle attacks, triggering those cinematic kills we've all been drooling over since May of 2005. Mastering the game's perfectly honed techniques creates a rhythmic fighting style that keeps you engaged like never before. Typically barbarian hordes won't dilly dally while you deal with them one at a time; they like to alternate, attacking in any number of combinations (say blue, orange and red in one quick chain), forcing you to quickly either roll out of range and engage them from behind or quickly change stances... tricky business. Connecting combos and countering is the key to filling the SuperStyle disc and escaping with ample energy for the road ahead. Your first time through Heavenly Sword you may find yourself overwhelmed once or twice, but the second time through is pure bliss.

In between battles we're met with adventuring on an epic scale—stopping often to pan left and right and then hug our PS3s—executed using the first-person projectile system and context-sensitive button acrobatics. It's not God of War by any stretch, but getting from one place to the next is nevertheless deeply rewarding. Ninja Theory present a myriad challenges along the way but never ever beat a dead horse. The game only evolves by what's thrown at you. There's nothing to power up or manage and only a single source of regaining energy via a few ornate pots strewn about. Forget sub menus or any cumbersome HUDs. Heavenly Sword is ALL action, aimed squarely at skilled players. The unskilled can get through it (and ultimately become better skilled), but the thrill is in mastering this artfully produced epic—negotiating a bridge of snipers unscathed or getting through an entire boss fight without a scratch. Presented in six chapters spread over 43 sections of varying length, Heavenly Sword is a cinematic journey you unfurl with a control pad. The entire game, especially Nariko, is all but alive. There's simply nothing like it. Following act one, as she speaks seemingly directly to you (she's addressing the sword), there's simply never been anything like it.

In regards to Heavenly's graphics I could simply vociferate a chain of tasteless expletives, but I'll attempt to assert the

"Heavenly Sword isn't meant to be beaten and discarded; it was born to savor."

**Something is mighty fishy here...**

"…you just don't see animation of this caliber in a video game. In the areas of realistic human movement and facial detail Heavenly Sword stands alone."

equivalent in a dignified manor beginning with the models; individual works of art, all of them. Not only in their construction, but you just don't see animation of this caliber in a video game. In the areas of realistic human movement and facial detail Heavenly Sword stands alone. And the environments; whether you're traversing a picturesque valley or doing battle amidst the game's grandiose palatial structures, every last detail has been attended to, from a wee table setting or vase to gushing waterfalls, enormous bridges and rugged hillsides. In harmony with the orchestral magic playing in the background and lighting from the gods, it's almost too much to take in. Do not under any circumstances rush through this game. Many years and countless hours have been spent to provide you with these moments, so seize your sixty dollars worth by the penny. What a tiny price for entertainment on such a grand scale. And speaking of price, I think I mentioned that all of this exaltedness carries one…

Heavenly Sword is short, or at least people will say that it is. It's actually extremely long, although I doubt that my colleagues will see it that way. Let's have some fun and keep count shall we? Much like those great 16-bit Rare, Nintendo, and Treasure games of old that were so superior at the time that you played them for months (and maybe still do), Heavenly Sword isn't meant to be beaten and discarded; it was born to savor. Where those games were maybe 45 minutes to at the most three hours in duration, Heavenly Sword is enormous by comparison, weighing at 6-8 hours depending on your skill level, including a final battle that was so rock hard the team was kind enough to ratchet it down a notch (see: I did you a solid!). Provided you survive it, finishing the game on normal opens Hell Mode, which I'm embarking on as I write this, and beyond that you'll have to defer to the interview that follows.

For me, Heavenly Sword has revitalized a lost era. Ninja Theory have created a game so superior that you won't care that, rather than being drawn out, it does everything once or twice to perfection and then moves on. It's so rewarding an experience that all you're able to think about when it's over is doing it again, only better. As much as I love journeys like Kameo, I'm equally as thrilled to recapture the art of pure twitch gameplay exhibited in Heavenly Sword. I've worked extremely long and hard for my skills; it's nice to take them out for a spin every once in awhile.

We live in a world where we truly can have it all. This very moment you can embark on massive action role-playing games, sweeping RPGs, complex first-person shooters or any number of epic racers, but thus far in what's sure to be a decade to remember with our PS3s there's only been one perfect pure action game. Heavenly Sword isn't merely without flaw, it's without equal. What MotorStorm has become to racing and Odin Sphere to action role-playing, Heavenly Sword is now to 3D action: Perfection.

**Heavenly Sword** — score **10**

| | |
|---|---|
| + | The perfect action game in every way and quite possibly the most cinematic game ever created. |
| – | Some might call it short. I would disagree. |

| | |
|---|---|
| **System(s)** | PlayStation 3 |
| **Developer** | Ninja Theory |
| **Publisher** | SCEA |
| **Online/Multi** | NA |
| **ESRB Rating** | M |
| **Available** | September |

Interviews ▸

**And coming soon to a PlayStation Network near you...**
**Heavenly Sword: The Animated Series**

Presented in 720p HD, Heavenly Sword is also an animated series! The history of the Heavenly Sword will be revealed in five stunning animated episodes, beginning with Episode One: The Legend of the Sword and culminating with Episode Five: The Day of the Warrior, which sets the stage for the events of the game.

## Matthew Preece

Lead Environment Art Ninja

In 1999 Matt left behind the exciting world of 2D graphic design and enrolled in a computer animation course at Bournemouth University. Graduating in 2002 he joined Ninja Theory (née Just Add Monsters) just in time to model a crucial toilet cubical for their upcoming release, Kung-Fu Chaos.

Matt took the position of Lead Environment Ninja and now leads his band of merry men through the highs and lows of game development, looking after areas of environments, particles, lighting and anything else he can stick his nose into! His passion for the job is derived from his love of expansive directional landscapes…"The natural world is amazing, it can just blow you away."

Matt spends his spare time trying to find the most eccentric village festivals around Cambridgeshire. So far the Whittlesea Straw Bear Festival is winning.

**play: What type of research did you do to create the world of Heavenly Sword? It has an extremely authentic look about it, from the grand architecture down to the pottery.**

Matthew Preece: From very early on we knew we wanted to create epic environments. Books such as *La Tour* (by Benoît Peeters and François Schuiten), games like Ico, films like *Musa*, these all have some sublime moments in them and we knew we wanted to create something of a similar scale. Heavenly Sword's origins have a very strong Eastern influence but we were careful not to limit ourselves to a certain place or time, and so spent a lot of time researching styles not only across history but across cultures. Many of the early sketches had an overwhelming Japanese influence but we wanted something less specific and more primitive. We looked at many different cultures and came up with a couple of distinct directions for the different styles within the game. Look closely and you can see architecture from China, Japan, Mongolia, Thailand, India, Central America, Mexico...the list goes on. Spotting them is a game in itself!

The other key element is that all the artists work on making believable functioning elements—this sounds obvious but is something that is often overlooked. Each object, be it building or prop, was looked at as a element within the culture we were trying to bring to life; for example a building may have rooms, stairs, corridors and windows—but crucially it has a purpose and an identity—it belongs. This was essential to ground the environment and help in creating a believable universe.

**The detail and lighting in the game is humbling. Panning from right to left in certain areas I was literally almost brought to tears. Pots, bottles, trellises, shrubs, tables, table settings…it's unbelievable how much you've put into this game, much of it for us to lay to waste. It's insane what it takes to create an epic now that you have the power to realize your most ambitious vision. Do you as a team find this liberating as you're toiling away or is it just daunting?**

Hehe, yeah it's made me cry before as well! You're right however: the amount of work in creating something like this is huge. I think if we could have seen a list of

> "Each object, be it building or prop, was looked at as an element within the culture we were trying to bring to life."

### About Ninja Theory Ltd.

Ninja Theory was formed in Cambridge England, in November of 2004, by Nina Kristensen (Chief Development Ninja), Mike Ball (Chief Technology Ninja), Tameem Antoniadis (Chief Design Ninja) and Non-Executive Ninja, Jez San OBE. Ninja Theory was formerly known as Just Add Monsters Ltd and was the team behind Kung Fu Chaos. Ninja Theory believes in the potential of next-generation gaming to elevate games into a true artistic entertainment medium to rival film, theatre and literature. As such Ninja Theory were one of the first game development studios in the world to focus exclusively on next generation gaming and is currently developing Heavenly Sword for PlayStation 3, under an exclusive agreement with Sony Computer Entertainment Inc.

everything that needed doing on day one, we would have run a mile!
The advantage of working with the team we have here is that not only are they all really talented but everyone is incredibly passionate. The artists are constantly trying new things out and seeing if we can push things that little bit more. The level of detail is something we wanted to keep as high as possible; a lot of games that try to exist on a larger scale suffer from very detailed characters running around in low-resolution environments. We wanted to eliminate this as much as possible and really just cram as much stuff in as we could. To get all this in however we need to stick to strict sectoring and resource budgets; the trick is finding new ways to get more elements to fit in! And we really tried to get a lot of smashable objects scattered around the game. After all, smashing stuff is fun right?
The large open vistas are something we worked hard to achieve. It's great to see a building in the distance and know you are going to go there. Creating an entire environment like this is a massive job; whilst very rewarding, it can be all consuming. It just gets in your head and all you can think about is whether a certain mountain is in the right place or if a waterfall would look better 50m to the left (it didn't)! Add to this our lighting set-up, which must be one of the most physically realistic out there, and we have the ability to create pretty much whatever we want. That's definitely a liberating experience!

## Tameem Antoniades

Co-founder & Chief Creative Ninja

Tameem has been involved in the games industry since 1995 having worked as a games programmer and designer at Millennium Interactive and Sony Cambridge. After 5 years in the trenches, he co-founded Just Add Monsters in 2000 and headed the design of critically acclaimed Kung Fu Chaos for the Xbox, published by Microsoft Games Studios.
In 2005, Just Add Monsters became Ninja Theory and Tameem continued work on the award winning Heavenly Sword, one of the most anticipated games for the PlayStation 3, as Creative Director.
He was lucky enough to be able to expand his design role into story and character development, on-set motion capture direction, cinematography and editing working closely with Andy Serkis and Weta Digital in New Zealand.
With the arrival of powerful new console hardware, Tameem believes in the potential of games as a new dramatic medium and hopes to continue to push this area of gaming beyond expectations.

**play: Heavenly Sword was one of the first games announced for the PS3, yet it's in a class by itself—a new benchmark for adventure gaming. Did you start off with and stick to a single design document/model or did the game undergo somewhat of an evolutionary process? After that fateful E3 many speculated that it was going to be along the lines of a Dynasty Warriors. I love that aspect of it but I'm sooo glad it's not.**

We started with a concept idea. We had no idea what a next generation game should look like as this was well over four years ago. So we spent three months producing a CG trailer in 2003 that hit all the key points for the game: great visuals, cinematic combat, armies and dramatic performances.

Ever since then, the game development has been an evolutionary process where we tried to nail each of the elements in the trailer. Once we had prototyped each area, we then set about integrating them and refining them into one engine and one gameplay experience. So while the details of the game have changed a lot from the initial design, the concept has always remained true.

At the time, I thought we had set the visual bar too high for the CG trailer. Looking back, the in-game gameplay and visuals far exceed it!

**Are these all stage actors? Was it a grueling audition process? How long did it take to find your Nariko?**

All the actors have been involved in stage and TV or film. Andy Serkis* and I decided that stage experience would be best for the game as it requires acting through voice, body and face whereas, for example, TV actors usually don't use their bodies.

Anna Torv who plays Nariko had already worked in theatre, TV and film in Australia and was really great in the auditions. Lydia Baksh who plays Kai is an exceptional actress who is very physical and teaches movement to drama students. Of note is also Steven Berkoff who plays Flying Fox. He has been in innumerable Hollywood films but is best known for shaking up theatre with his one-man-shows where he pioneered a branch of theatre called expressionism. He really is a sight to behold!

The casting process was the same as for any film. Andy got his casting agent on board to do all the ground work and he narrowed down the choices to three actors per role. I simply then went to the final casting session and chose the ones we thought were right in terms of voice, body movements and facial expressions. It wasn't that difficult because we had a good casting agent.

> "...while the details of the game have changed a lot from the initial design, the concept has always remained true."

** Andy Serkis is our Dramatic Director who also plays evil King Bohan. Easily the most accomplished CG actor in the world, you may know him as Gollum in* Lord of the Rings *and Kong in* King Kong.

**Nariko's breasts don't move in the slightest. Was there any back and fourth about whether or not they should?**

We simply ran out of time to do this. It was a bitter, bitter pill to swallow. Not because we wanted titillation (excuse the pun) but because breasts will always naturally move, and that subliminally adds to the realism of a character.

**Heavenly Sword is a testament to the power of the single-player gaming experience. We hear people going on about MMOs and multiplayer constantly, but we feel unanimously that they cannot and never will come close to games like Heavenly Sword, God of War, Gears of War, Resident Evil, Metal Gear etc., etc. Take your own Kung Fu Chaos for instance. I'd kill for that game as a single-player platformer. What's your take on online gaming? It sucks right?**

Nah! That's unfair to say! I'd say that gaming is the most diverse medium in existence and that it has many, many branches from story-based games to puzzles to multiplayer frag-fests to 2nd life. I have a problem with people saying one branch of gaming is better than another when they shouldn't really be compared. I also have a problem with a single game trying to cover all bases and thus compromise all areas. The way I see it is that if you want your multiplayer fix, play a great multiplayer game, maybe Warhark

on the PS3. If you want a great single-player experience, try Heavenly Sword. But to complain that Warhawk doesn't have single player and Heavenly Sword doesn't have multiplayer goes against what those games are all about.

**Do you have any downloadable (or embedded) content planned for replayability beyond Hell Mode such as alternative outfits? Although I'll play HS for months mastering and savoring it, you know that much of the press will find fault in the game's length…**

Yes. We are making plans right now for downloadable content and Home support in particular, which is very exciting to us! It will also allow us to speak to our fans directly and see what they want from the game.

**When all is said and done, how long did Heavenly Sword take? And more importantly now that you've done it, how long will it take to produce the sequel? I know you like to develop new IP but c'mon, this is your franchise right? Surely the sword lives on…**

The concept idea was first mooted early to mid 2003. So all in all it has taken about four years. In that time, we went from 22 people to 95 at the peak of production, worked on the game for a year without funding and built our tech from scratch, so I actually think it is not bad going for a game with so much ambition. If we did a sequel, it would take half this time at most, I should hope.

**Well, I'd like to personally thank you for the time and effort you've put into this game. Players like me that scour every inch and take it all in will be beyond themselves. It's truly a work of art. Is there anything you'd like to say to the people to mark the occasion of the first US review?**

Thanks to everyone for getting excited about this game since we released the in-game trailer at E3 2005, the playable at E3 2006 and the demo this year. Heavenly Sword has a lot of hype behind it, but if you strip that all away, I think you will find the game to be enjoyable and touching. The Ninjas will celebrate the US launch with a beer for sure!

"The inspiration for the three stances really emerged from Panzer Dragoon Orta…"

## SaiTong Man

Lead Combat Design Ninja

SaiTong joined Ninja Theory, formerly Just Add Monsters, in 2002 leaving behind a life of design engineering to work on the company's first game, Kung Fu Chaos. When Just Add Monsters (who reformed as Ninja Theory) began working on Heavenly Sword, he was given the task to design and develop a new combat system.
Over the last few years of development, working with a close-knit team of programmers, designers and animators, SaiTong has designed and combined the features and content in order to implement the combat system for the currently highly anticipated next-gen title Heavenly Sword.
SaiTong dislikes cheese, salty foods and coffee. He likes to design and build stuff and his favourite word is potato.

**play: I love the three-tier fighting system with the color-enhanced attacks. How difficult was it to arrive at a gameplay model for the fighting? Did you consider different approaches?**

The inspiration for the three stances really emerged from Panzer Dragoon Orta mixed with the different types of characters in Soul Calibur. We imagined, when playing Soul Calibur the idea of switching from the massive weapon-type characters like Siegfried and the more rapid fighters like Taki in an instant.

In Panzer Dragoon Orta there are three dragon forms—Base Wing, Heavy Wing and Glide Wing, between which you can switch. And if you have played that game you will really see similarities between its dragon forms and our three-stance system.

**…Must have been hard to balance too. The way tougher characters link colors forces players to change styles in the blink of an eye. Did you focus test that aspect of the game? The end result is deeply rewarding.**

We always felt that the three-stance system was a winner and were excited at the prospect of building game characters around it. For everyone who played Nariko it just seemed to click. The color announcing came quite late in the project. Newcomers found it too hard to distinguish the attacks and we needed a way to inform players quickly the situation around them. The color coordination solved all this and was instantly welcomed and when we play-tested the game the data we received fully supported this.

**The finishing and cinematic moves are gorgeously choreographed. If God of War hadn't introduced context sensitive finishing moves, do you think they still would have made its way into the fabric of today's games? (For what it is, I like that yours are kept to a minimum).**

Nariko sets up an air combo.

I don't believe you can credit context sensitive finishing moves solely to God of War, many games have used them in the past. Our finishing moves are executed through our counter system and is differentiated from God of War in this manner, our bosses however, are modeled more closely to the God of War finishers. As with all industries there are rarely any true original ideas, just new combination of ideas or new approaches to old ones. As an industry we have to thank God of War a lot for making such a bold statement with their game and giving many developers a point to aspire to.

**I like the way you utilize it for Nariko's jumping and acrobatics, but a part of me wants every game to feature some manual platforming. Did it just not fit into your vision?**

The removal of the jump button was always a contentious one. But our focus was on combat, not platforming so our decision was simple. Context sensitivity is becoming a bigger aspect of gaming as we strive to do more and more things within our gaming worlds without adding more and more buttons. But that isn't to say one button, one function is bad; in fact it is positively good. Generally the simpler the solution the better but what constitutes the simplest solution can itself be fairly complex.

**I was elated to find Kai so prominently featured in the game. Her gameplay compliments Nariko's perfectly. Did you at any time consider an option to guide her projectiles (Nariko's too for that matter) with the left analog, or was your focus on the SIXAXIS from day one? It takes some getting used to but once mastered it's quite a rush.**

We started the game when the PS3 did not exist and we were building towards an unknown machine. We always had aftertouch control but when we were on board with Sony and discovered the SIXAXIS, we knew that it would work perfectly with our game.

"Context sensitivity is becoming a bigger aspect of gaming as we strive to do more and more things within our gaming worlds..."

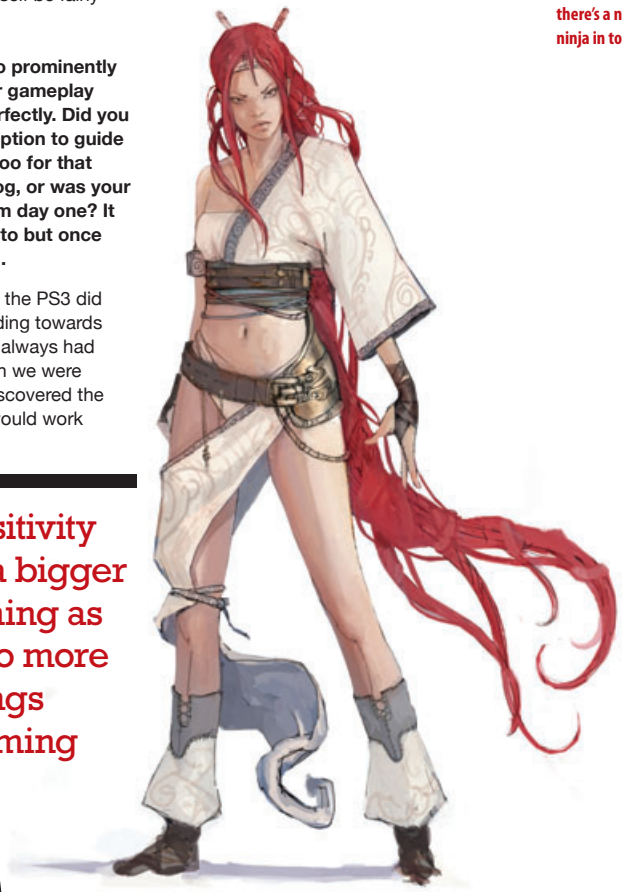
## Laura Kippax

Lead Character Art Ninja

Laura started at the company in 2002 shortly before the transition of Monsters to Ninjas. She was one of the first character modellers at Ninja Theory, which gave her the unique opportunity to be the primary modeller of both playable characters in Heavenly Sword, Nariko and Kai. Laura's role transitioned to Lead Character Artist in 2005. Working with a small (but perfectly formed) team, the rest of the diverse personalities that appear in the title, from the army rabble, to the unique, flamboyant Generals were modelled, rigged and textured.
Laura finds she has a natural affinity with those who bake... mainly cake... of the chocolate variety.

**play: On the subject of authenticity Nariko herself is simply spectacular. Aside from the most expressive face and personality in all of gaming, things like discoloration and slight bumping around her knees, small scrapes and the like make her as close to real as it gets. She appears to have actual skin. Are we into a whole new level of texturing with the PS3 or is this some proprietary technique?**

The PS3 has enabled us to implement larger and more complex textures and shaders than we have in the past. We had a fabulous texture artist on board who created beautiful, hand-painted textures which were then enhanced by the combined use of high-res normal maps and bump maps. The latter maps, created in packages such as Zbrush and Mudbox, are sympathetic to both model and texture. For example, where you have pores and scars on the color texture, the bump information matches this so scars become silvery and raised, pores indented. The detail and resolution is such that these nuances are apparent in-game and the addition of animated wrinkle maps is another texture tool used to enhance the characters and add to their realism and believability.



Move over Ryu; there's a new ninja in town.

Real furrows accompany determined frowns or evil squints in the emotionally charged cutscenes. These already highly detailed maps are further brought to life by layering specular and occlusion maps into our custom skin shader. The subtleties of these maps, in conjunction with the shader, enable the skin to glisten, shine and emulate the radiance of real skin.

A possible unsung hero in breathing life into the textures and shaders is the lighting. The capabilities of PS3 have allowed our engine programmers to integrate a full HDR lighting model into the renderer. This allows us to simulate how both cameras and the human eye perceive the world, adding elements such as auto exposure and enhancing the various skin shader properties including emulating subsurface scattering, in a way that simply wasn't possible on previous generation consoles.

"A possible unsung hero in breathing life into the textures and shaders is the lighting."

## Alessandro "Talexi" Taini

Senior Concept Art Ninja

Talexi was born in Genoa (Italy) where he studied illustration and advertising at the School of Visual Communication. He then moved to Milan where he began a successful career as a creative designer and visualiser, working for various advertising companies. During that time he also created various published book covers as a freelance artist.
Talexi then moved to London where he worked as concept artist and graphic designer on the award winning *LUMINAL* (Best Movie Award at the Rome Independent Film Festival '04). In 2005 he published his first horror illustration book *DARK DEMONIA*, written by Italian novelist Isabella Santacroce. Since 2003, Talexi has been the Senior Concept Artist at Ninja Theory working on Heavenly Sword, one of the most anticipated original video games for PlayStation3.

## Ricky Wood

Senior Animation Ninja

After spending many years trying to capture life using pencil and paper, Ricky finally slipped head first into the world of CG, making his first short film in 2002.
His professional entrance into CG animation started with Ninja Theory's highly acclaimed Heavenly Sword. Ricky quickly became a key member of the team and was promoted to Senior Animator. As well as creating in-game animations for Heavenly Sword, it has also been his role to develop styles of movement for leading characters such as the beautiful Nariko, the cat-like Kai and the huge fatty, Roach. It is the creation of a character personality that attracts him most to a project and what ultimately led him to work for Ninja Theory.
Incidentally, Ricky can NOT eat 5 jam donuts in 5 minutes.

**play: She's among the most expressive personalities in any game and, amazingly, her movements perfectly mimic her playful demeanor. Is she based on an actual person? Is there a Kai somewhere out there in the world? Is it just me or does she resemble Bjork?**

**Alex** - From the beginning I wanted Kai to have a feline way about her. After reading the Heavenly Sword script it was clear that she was someone free and expressive, but also very vulnerable. I found the idea of making her cat-like was an interesting and visual way of describing this personality.

**Ricky** - Talexi's concepts of Kai were always a huge inspiration for the animators. Her cat-like attitude was something different, something fun and gave us the chance of exploring different ways of animating the human body. She would have to feel consistent though, but at the same time able to go from moving on all fours, to walking upright to flipping around doing cartwheels!

**Alex** - It's important for me to create art that is useful for the entire team, from modelling to final animations. For Kai I knew that her movement was vital to her overall expression, so I worked closely with Ricky to create something more than just pretty pictures. I drew her in poses that would be inspirational for in-game animations.

**Ricky** - As well as using our concept art we looked at outside sources, such as Miyazaki's *Princess Mononoke,* Free Running* and of course... CATS! No not the musical! In *Princess Mononoke* we liked elements of how San moved—with a low centre of gravity and feral posture.

It was clear from the gameplay side that she should move effortlessly through the environments. The current trend of Free Running gave us a huge video resource for this! The mix of Free Running with a hint of "meow" has always been rewarding for me personally and is at the heart of what

The Heavenly Sword universe is brutal yet filled with beauty.

makes Kai's movement unique.

It's worth noting that our concepts and animations were brilliantly respected in the motion capture shoots. Without this Kai would have lacked consistency and would not be the empathetic character she is.

** Free running is a physical art, in which participants (freerunners) attempt to pass all obstacles in their path in a smooth and fluid way. Free runners interact with their environment using movements such as vaulting, jumping, somersaults and other acrobatic movements, creating an athletic and aesthetically pleasing way of moving. It is commonly practised at gymnasiums and in urban areas that are cluttered with obstacles. [Wikipedia]*

"Generally, the more complex the system the more opportunities exist for continued refinement and improvement."

## Mike Ball

Co-founder & Chief Technology Ninja

Mike has been developing computer games professionally since 1992. During this time he has worked as a programmer at Millennium Interactive, Head of Programming at Virgin Interactive and the Manager of the Internal Technologies Group at Sony Computer Entertainment Europe.
By 2000 Mike felt it was time to start his own company and became a co-founder of Just Add Monsters Ltd. Focusing the company on social gaming, Mike was responsible for the creation of the combat engine and technology for the multiplayer game Kung Fu Chaos. As Co-founder and Chief Technology Ninja of Ninja Theory Ltd, Mike was determined to push the company to become one of the best developers in the world. To this end, he is responsible for the development of a 2nd generation combat platform on PlayStation 3 hardware that brings the heroic tale of Heavenly Sword to your home. Mike is looking forward to the 3rd generation! In his rare spare time Mike likes to mountain bike (with a cup of tea) and surf (with a Cornish pasty)… he does both equally badly.

**play: I'm noticing more and more, especially now in Heavenly, how normal mapping looks so natural on the PS3. Where it appears to glisten on 360 it's almost invisible on PS3. Is this another aspect of cell processing?**

There are many pixel shader techniques that people use to enable the normal mapping effect and some give better quality results at the cost of more processing on the RSX. We went for the best that we could technically afford. It also depends largely on the lighting model that is used. Heavenly Sword uses a spherical harmonics component as well as the main lighting component so that we get a very natural look. The SH component is especially important when items are in shadow so you get some tone from the normal map details. Perhaps another reason that it looks so good is because we have managed to squeeze 4xAnti-aliasing into the rendering pipeline of Heavenly Sword, which will remove some of the glisten you've noticed.

**Speaking of the cells, and Sony's wise 10-year plan, how much of the system's potential do you think you've tapped compared to where you'll be three or four games into the cycle?**

This is actually one of the things I love most about working on console systems. They just get better and better with age! Generally, the more complex the system the more opportunities exist for continued refinement and improvement. While we are utilizing the power of the PS3, specifically the cell processor and Blu-Ray technologies, there's a lot more for gamers to look forward to. If you think about it, the PS3 is in its infancy when you consider the 10-year lifespan of PlayStation platforms. I personally cannot wait to see the games that are produced when developers are truly squeezing every last drop of performance from the PS3.

"Quite simply, this game wouldn't be possible on another platform. It would have been a very different product..."

**And how about that hair? Somebody talk to me about the hair.**

The hair is a multi-chain dynamic simulation running on an SPU that performs collision detection against Nariko as well as reacting to wind forces in the environment. Because it's fully dynamic, it's got a life of its own, so 99% of the time it looks really cool... but there's always that 1% when it sneaks off to do something naughty behind Nariko's back.

We actually have to disable collision between the hair and Nariko's blades. Having a physical simulation mixing with non-physically correct motion of Nariko when she is attacking is like oil and water —they just don't mix. Either she would chop her hair off, or the hair gets hit away at lightspeed and then wraps around her head so she can't see where she's going. Nariko is generally like a rockstar, she actually has a small wind force that follows her around to blow the hair out of her face.

The hair also utilizes a cool hair shader just like real life. So the next time you are gazing adoringly at your girlfriend's hair on a warm summer's evening, look out for the double highlight on her lovely locks. We emulate that effect in HS!

**Did HS really begin life as an Xbox 360 game? Or was it simply planned to be 360? Could this game have been achieved on 360?**

HS originally started as a PC prototype (you can see the videos on YouTube) and for a short while did in fact exist as a playable on the 360 platform. Certainly what we had planned *at that point in time* would have worked on the 360—but the game has grown organically over the years to focus on the hardware present in the PS3. Quite simply, this game wouldn't be possible on another platform. It would have been a very different product to what we have now.... it certainly would have had to be sold on more than one disk for example… we've absolutely jam-packed the Blu-Ray with data!

## Tom Colvin

Lead Audio Ninja

Having been surrounded by microphones and spliced tape since birth, Tom was destined for life as a Sound Designer. After spending several years as a freelance sound engineer and producer, Tom got his first job in games with Climax Ltd. in 2002.
Following the completion of the score and soundfx for the Xbox title Sudeki, Tom joined Ninja Theory in 2005, and has been striving to push the boundaries of quality and style in audio ever since. He and his team have worked closely with Nitin Sawhney and the foley artists who created the sound of *Crouching Tiger* (Play it by Ear) to produce a beautiful and compelling sonic experience within Heavenly Sword.
Tom likes his guitar and assorted African instruments, designing synthesizers, and playing twitch games. He dislikes freezer food and moths.

**play: The voice acting is extraordinary. When Flying Fox exclaims "You are full of spirit…you are full of passion…" it's like a great play. Did the actors work together in the booth or come in one at a time?**
Thanks for the compliment! I think there are a number of reasons it feels like that. We felt that it was essential we created believable characters, who you could empathize with (or be horrified by!). All our efforts as far as the dramatic process was concerned, were designed to attain that goal. We were lucky enough to get Andy Serkis involved at an early stage, and his influence set the quality bar very high. He was involved in casting, editing the script, and of course, directed all the action with Tameem. We knew that the performance would be at it's most convincing when the actors were together on set, so we made sure that the VO was recorded during the mocap sessions, in order to avoid using too much overdubbing at a later stage, and I feel that this process really paid off. The performances really come alive, in a way that I've never seen in a game before.

**The music in the game is extraordinary. It feels as if a Symphony might have conducted it while watching the game unfold. How did you go about scoring Heavenly Sword?**

Firstly, we had to find the right composer. This wasn't as difficult as it might seem: we drew up a list of criteria, and found that only one person in our shortlist fulfilled them all! We wanted a composer who was very much a contemporary artist, with a genuine background in eastern culture, equally at home with technology as with working with a full symphony orchestra, and who had plenty of experience working to picture.

Nitin Sawhney has all of these and more: as well as being an award winning solo artist, he's also a flamenco guitarist, a tabla player, a highly gifted jazz pianist (played with Courtney Pine) and (as if this wasn't enough) has also co-written and performed in an award winning TV comedy series in the UK (*Goodness Gracious Me*).

Once we had found Nitin, we began working on the musical themes behind Heavenly Sword. These musical ideas or *leitmotifs* form the backbone of any large scale musical production; these are simple musical phrases that connect the player with the central themes of the project. We worked on the feeling and style of the music, and it was at this stage we decided that we wanted to make use of solo instrumentalists. Nitin has worked with many talented musicians during his career, and he was keen to bring their skills to Heavenly Sword. He created a series of pieces, and during numerous recording sessions, worked their own unique contributions into the score.

The results are truly beautiful, and it was this beauty that we felt had to be supported rather than compromised in the technology. Every game has to deal with this music playback issue. The player can do what they like within given guidelines, so we have to have a music playback system that adapts to what the player does, as it happens. From the very beginning, we established how the music system would be allowed to control the music, so Nitin composed everything with these limitations in mind. The system was designed to react to the game action in a *musical* way. We designed a system whereby the game an ask the music system to change, and the music system will change at a musically appropriate time. In this way, we avoid destroying the expression and emotional message of the music.

Having designed the music system and composed over three hours of music, the final recordings and mix could begin. Nitin and his team took the Orchestral sections of the score to Prague where they were recorded by the Prague Philharmonic Orchestra. Finally, the finished pieces were mixed in his own studio (Spirit Dance) in London. These polished pieces were given to us as component parts (stems), which allowed us to integrate them into the game actions with a great degree of flexibility, and created the illusion that (as you say) the music is being performed as the game unfolds.

"We wanted a composer who was very much a contemporary artist, with a genuine background in eastern culture..."

A rare moment of tranquility.

## Stuart Adcock

Senior Character Art Ninja

Stuart graduated from Bournemouth with an Animation degree and began his career with Sony Cambridge in 2001 creating characters and animations for Ghosthunter on the PS2.
As part of Sony's Advanced Technology Group, he was granted early access to PS3 and was responsible for pushing boundaries and exploring new ideas and methods for next-gen character creation. This led to a pivotal role in creating the "Alfred Molina" real-time face demo for the PS3 press launch event at E3 2005.
Stuart then channelled his experience into the highly anticipated PS3 title Heavenly Sword and grabbed the opportunity to become a Ninja. He took responsibility for facial development and was tasked with sculpting the digital faces, the facial expressions and supervising the facial animation.
He was fortunate to be part of the team involved in the performance capture sessions at WETA digital and even slipping into a motion capture suit to play a cowardly commander. Just don't mention his "precious" one line of dialog that was eventually over dubbed.

**play: Great voice acting is rare but what makes it so cohesive in Heavenly Sword are the mannerisms that accompany the dialogue. We've seen it attempted before, but never perfected to such a degree, down to subtle gestures like a flip of the wrist. Is every frame of this game motion captured? How did you achieve this look seamlessly from the cinemas to the game?**

We're very proud of the depth of emotion we've brought to the story, its success is largely due to the fact that everyone involved in the process went to great lengths to achieve it. Weta Digital developed a new facility that allowed us to record facial, body and voice from multiple actors simultaneously, which proved instrumental to the capture process. When every subtlety is recorded it puts a lot of emphasis on the actors. As Dramatic Director, Andy Serkis did a great job selecting the cast and getting the best out of each of them. He was keen to get actors with a strong theatrical background and really push their mannerisms to fit the extravagant world of Heavenly Sword.

The animations that make up the game's Hero Sequences and combat are treated very differently and just wouldn't be possible with motion capture; these are hand-crafted animations and have been refined over the years. Having these two approaches work seamlessly was always a high priority. The combat animations were shown to the actors to help them get into character. In return the actors brought a lot of inspiration to the animators creating the combat moves. For example, Steven Berkoff's performance as Flying Fox was truly insane: he helped re-invent his character and define his combat moves. His performance has to be seen to be believed—even Andy was speechless!

**In concert with the impeccable writing and acting, the facial expression makes the game come alive. You even got the teeth and inner mouth right. That's never been done. Is it the cells?**

Ha, I think in this case it's more brain cells and even a few blood cells! Creating the facial expressions took a lot of research and a lot of refinement. The process began with taking reference of the actors stretching their face to the extremes, as you can imagine some expressions were more flattering than others. From this reference we knew what muscles we needed to re-create in our digital faces, so providing we simulated the effects of these facial muscles, we can create an unlimited amount of expressions.

The expressions are essentially driven by the actors, a process known as performance capture. This took place at Weta Digital and, in a nutshell, the team decomposed the actor's performance and worked out what muscles they were using at any one time. This data was then used to drive the facial muscles of our digital faces and give a virtual performance which does justice to the original.

All of this detail would have been wasted if the teeth looked out of place, so every little detail was considered down to the layers of the eye and the wrinkling of the skin. We do share a lot of technology and assets between characters; in fact below the surface King Bohan and Nariko have a lot in common, just like you and I. Early on we worked out which elements we could share, so we could afford more time developing them.

It's details like this that we hope will make the game come alive. Throughout all areas of the game you'll see the same attention to detail, all contributing to helping us reach our goal—to remain stylized but feel very alive. Where possible we follow real-world physics and properties to keep a sense of realism, but often take it one step further. Take the skin shader for example: simulating blood under the surface helps to make skin feel alive, but if you exaggerate those characteristics, suddenly you've got something grounded in reality, but even richer and larger than life—welcome to the world of Heavenly Sword.

**How much time do you estimate all this detail tacked on to the development time?**

I'm glad you mentioned time and not budget!... During our time at Weta we did essentially shoot a movie, however the process ran parallel with the game development so it rarely felt like we were adding to the development time. We also took the opportunity to work with specialized people at Weta such as video editors and motion editors, which added to the success of the cinematics and took some pressure off us.

We also have a dedicated cutscene team running parallel with the animation team to feed off one another and not detract from the combat animations. Keeping pretty much all of the development within our studio has been great for moral and has had a positive influence across various aspects of the game. For example, the extra detail we added to character textures, shaders and lighting for the cutscenes often found its way into the playable sections. Unless we felt the player wouldn't notice any difference and would prefer a few more enemies on screen.

> "I'm glad you mentioned time and not budget!... During our time at Weta we did essentially shoot a movie..."

TEEN
T
CONTENT RATED BY
ESRB
Blood
Violence
Mild Language
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# E32007

We came, we saw, we wrote it down

Despite its migration from the oppressive LA convention center to the far-more-hospitable Santa Monica coastline, E3 2007 was still pretty much what we've come to expect from an E3: tons of games, lots of walking, chest-beating press conferences, exclusive parties, and... well, at least this year it wasn't so noisy. There's always something to hate about the show, and more than enough to love—like the fact that this year promises so many great games, there's no way you'll find the time or money for them all.

"There's always something to hate about the show, and more than enough to love..."

## Game of the Show

### BioShock

Underwater bliss

BioShock has been continually vying for our attention ever since it blew us away at last year's E3. Here it is again, a month before final release, and there's no escaping its ability to impress us even more. There may have been games with more flash and noise, but it's hard to compete with BioShock's promise of a compelling story, radically new gameplay, and an underwater world filled with marvelously creepy sights and sounds. All this in a truly next-gen package.

| BioShock E32007 preview | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | Xbox 360, PC |
| Developer | Irrational Games |
| Publisher | 2K Games |
| Available | August |

# Legendary: The Box

## Unleashing Monster Hell

"The war going on here is of the mythical kind, when Pandora's Box is accidentally cracked open..."

Violence never solved anything? We beg to differ.

**words** Brady Fiechter

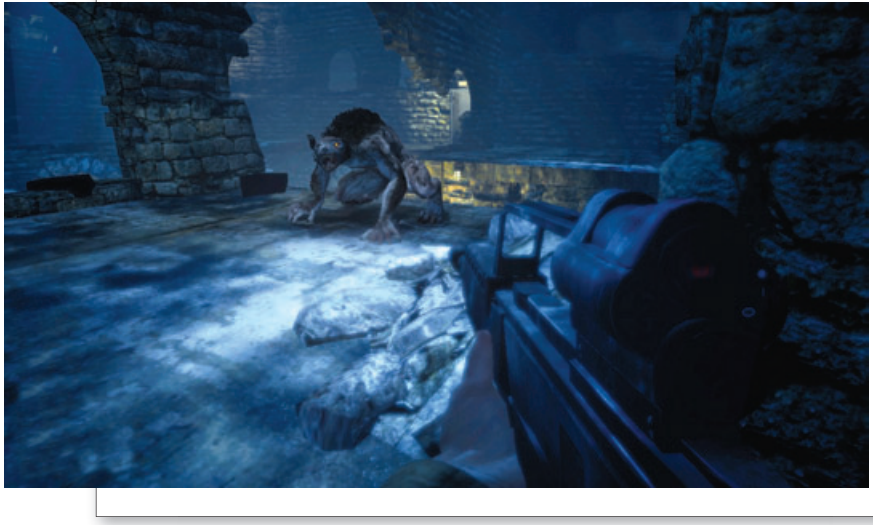
Legendary: The Box picks up a few bonus points for staying away from soldier-like guy dropped in a jungle or urban wasteland or World War II. The war going on here is of the mythical kind, when Pandora's Box is accidentally cracked open to reveal all sorts of very large, very angry creatures.

New York receives the brunt of the monster storm in the opening, which begins in a museum as you guide your art thief, Deckard, through a lengthy obstacle course of destruction on his way to picking up plenty of firearms to defend. When the scene moves into the terrorized streets, the game's intent begins to form: the enemy comes in very large sizes, like the towering golem, created out of cars and rocks and rubble; and the obviously very hungry gryphon, which tears apart anything it can get its talons on. Smaller varieties of the pissed-off-for-being-caged-so-long opposition include the likes of werewolves, which do an especially fine job of closing out cover points; the developers don't want you to fall into a familiar pattern of strategy, as monsters scurry across walls and ceilings and demonstrate an awareness of the environment as much as your presence within. If a couch or similar object gets in the way of a charging monster, it will be able to deal with the roadblock according to its strength and weight. There appeared to be certain predictability to the widest swaths of destruction, but the goal is to give you a setting where your direct actions determine what stays in one piece and what gets mutilated.

The supernatural elements of the game aren't being played up to depict horror. During Legendary: The Box's demo, developer Spark emphasized instead their penchant for suspense to get your heart pumping. And a lot of shooting, of course.

**Legendary: The Box** E32007 preview

| | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | PC, 360, PS3 |
| Developer | Spark |
| Publisher | Gamecock |
| Available | 2008 |



www.play-magazine.com

# KILLZONE 2

OH YES, IT DOES LOOK THAT GOOD

words Brady Flechter

Say Halo to Sony's little friend.

Guerilla, the developer behind Killzone and this upcoming PS3-exclusive sequel, would like to point out that their character models contain the same polygon counts as a whole level of the first game on PlayStation 2. An entire level gobbles up a massive two gigs of space, making the Blu-Ray storage imperative.

Sounds neat, but beyond all the hard technical talk—and there's a hell of a lot of technical talk being dropped when Killzone 2 is the star of conversation—watching Kill Zone 2 move along adds a very laymen observation of "holy crap!" Just how good Killzone 2 looks has become more important than it needs to be, thanks to Sony's suspect first-look of the game with "target" video at E3 2005. At this point, let's all settle with the fact that the game is a striking visual achievement on a number of levels—based on one, finally, playable level that proved that a real-time Killzone 2 could in fact hit the target.

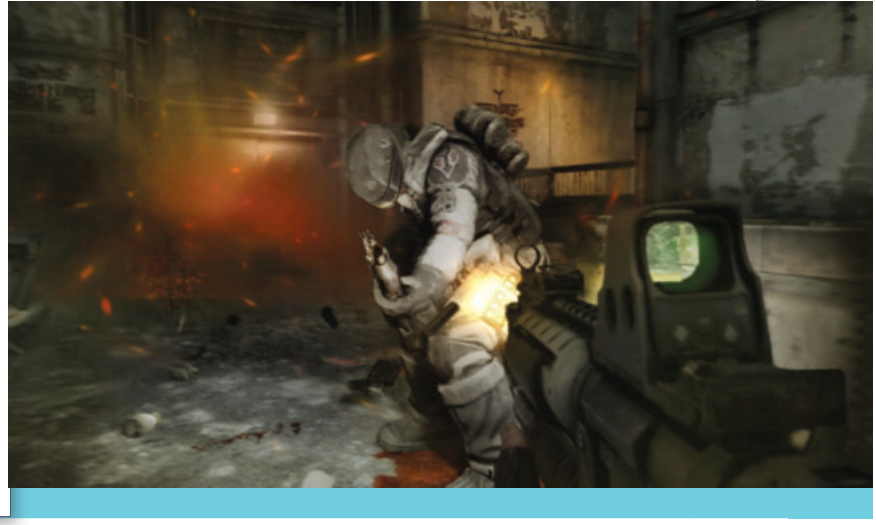
It's been two years since the Helghast—the bad guys—brought the hurt to the world of Vekta… The rest of the story can be summed up in: kill the Helghast! Which brings us back to the look of the game, established as a blend of what a modern-day war might contain with a sci-fi gloom and doom. The scenes that were shown demonstrated a style that doesn't immediately look like every other first-person war zone. Lightning of an exaggerated intensity lit up the smoky sky to gorgeous effect, and the idea of storming a giant lightning-rod shooter at the heart of the level looked like an inventive trek. The developers made mention that weather will be more than an atmospheric backdrop, playing into the enemy's hand at times.

There's no denying the drama and spectacle contained within the Killzone 2 presentation—qualities more than a few games at E3 could boast. The big question remains if the limp gameplay of the original will receive the same proper next-generation jolt as the visuals.

**Killzone 2** E32007 preview

| | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | PS3 |
| Developer | Guerilla Games |
| Publisher | SCEA |
| Available | 2008 |

"The rest of the story can be summed up in: kill the Helghast!"



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Mild Suggestive Themes

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# Uncharted: Drake's Fortune

Do you wanna be like Drake?

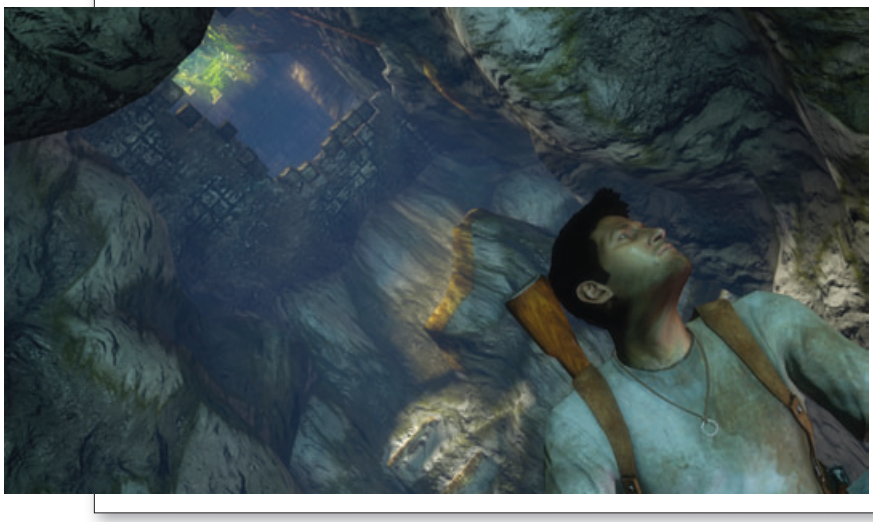
**words** Dave Halverson

Who does he think he is; Rico Rodriguez?

Given the inevitable comparisons to Tomb Raider—Naughty Dog could do worse—Uncharted: Drake's Fortune possesses a myriad play mechanics all its own while compounding all those Tomb Raider-esque stunts with a new level of peril via terrain-endemic obstacles and an assortment of Naughty Dog's patented tricks. In other words it's not Dude Raider. Now: that said, I will personally pay money for ND to either redesign Drake or ad some creation aspects like hair and clothing. I get the whole "everyman" angle, but did they have to make him look like Bruce Campbell? This could have been my game of the show, but I just can't wrap my brain around this guy. Give him a skull cap and long hair...a goatee—anything. He could do with a wardrobe change too. Such an epic and beautiful game needs a lead with some pizazz. Bring on the sizzle! Then again, shooting the poop with Jason Rubin at Comic Con he tells me that Drake really grows on you; that the whole reason behnd his John Doe design is so that players will assume the role. If that's the case I mesh better with characters of the female persuasion so, paging a Mrs. Drake. Why do I care so much? Look at the state of this game! It's beyond beautiful! Ditch this guy already!

**"Why do I care so much? Look at the state of this game! It's beyond beautiful! Ditch this guy already!"**

| Uncharted: Drake's Fortune (E3 2007) — preview | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | PS3 |
| Developer | Naughty Dog |
| Publisher | SCEA |
| Available | December |



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Jump in.

XBOX 360 LIVE

# Super Mario Galaxy

## The weason for Wii

**words** Dave Halverson

Have you heard? Mario turns into a buzzing bee, and can even be joined by a second player…but that's not the best of it. The really great news is that Super Mario Galaxy looks to be to the Wii what Super Mario Bros. was to the Nintendo 64. I'm the first one to admit that Nintendo has gone off the reservation—WiiFit seals it—but there are still a few first-party balls left in Nintendo's cartoon cannon. Namely, Battalion Wars 2, Metroid Prime 3, Mario Kart Wii, Super Smash Bros. Brawl and of course Super Mario Galaxy—games that began development before Nintendo decided that we were pond scum.

Unless they add a vacuum cleaner attachment for your mommy it's safe to assume that Nintendo is actually creating yet another epic Mario Bros. platformer. In fact, SMG marks the only true platformer currently in development for the Wii and it's like no other I have ever experienced. Although the gameplay itself is mostly familiar, the context in which it's presented is all new. The floating terrain adds a new dimension to the action, and the brilliant physics-based acrobatics in conjunction with the Wiimote and Nunchuk scream TM Nintendo-style fun. Gravity plays a role too, and the Mario bee bits show amazing promise. We're also beginning to see what the Wii hardware is capable of and it's pretty impressive. If only more publishers would utilize it! Even with Nintendo making games for Martha Stewart, we might still be okay if 3rd parties step up. As well as it's selling, I remain optimistic that they will, even though No More Heroes was nowhere to be found at E3. Regardless: November 12 is going to be the kind that made many of us disciples in the first place. Let's enjoy it for all it's worth.

> "We're also beginning to see what the Wii hardware is capable of and it's pretty impressive."

**Super Mario Galaxy** E32007 preview

| | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | Wii |
| Developer | Nintendo |
| Publisher | Nintendo |
| Available | Nov. 12 |

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XBOX 360 LIVE

# Condemnded 2 Bloodshot

## Hit Me With Your Bloodshot

words Brady Fiechter

As the Condemned 2: Bloodshot demo came to a close, someone asked, "Are you worried that the game might get an Adults Only rating?" It looks violent, sure, but not that violent. Such a strong reaction to the game, I believe, comes down to how exceptionally effective Condemned is at depicting the visceral emotion of its violence, much more than the explicit nature of it all. A lot of games show us scenes of death and dismemberment, but it's rare to really feel it in your gut. That's one of the reasons I loved Condemned, its constant state of tension thick and believable.

In this next chapter in the "Silence of the Lambs-meets-CSI" adventure, there's indeed plenty of interactive moments of brutality that at least will undoubtedly earn the Mature rating. If you're quick enough, you can grab an attacker's arm and break it, or take him to the ground and dislocate a shoulder. Rip a pipe apart for use as a weapon, expose an open flame and light your victim on fire. If there's a TV nearby, you can slam him head-first through the tube. Finishing moves are available, with the environment providing the various outcomes.

The fighting system has been revamped, preparing to add more hand-to-hand combat into the mix. A combo emphasis means to elevate the previous game's block-counter-hit simplicity (a choice I'm holding my breath on; "expect twice the gunplay" is also the official spiel). If you thought the first game's forensic gathering was a bit rote, Condemned 2's focus is to give you a far greater sense of involvement in the case. Extensive evidence is built and questioned at the scene of a crime: you study and decide elements like… was the body moved, possibly dragged? Is that an exit wound or an entrance wound? What's the nature of the person killed? You track a number of investigation points, rewarded for your correct estimations with equipment upgrades at the end of a level.

> "A lot of games show us scenes of death and dismemberment, but it's rare to really feel it in your gut."

Continuing the theme from Condemned: Criminal Origins, you again play as Ethan Thomas, who is led to (ahem) find his missing partner. An alcoholic with not a lot to lose, Ethan mirrors the dread of this world. If developing a deeper look at the narrative is your thing, televisions along the way an be tuned in to reveal more details into Condemned 2: Bloodshot's pestilent set-up.

**Condemned 2: Bloodshot** E32007 preview

| | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | PS3, Xbox 360 |
| Developer | Monolith |
| Publisher | Sega |
| Available | 2008 |

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# Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots

## Bringing out the big guns

**words** Heather Campbell

> "With much of the action taking place in the Middle East, MGS4 is an unsettling piece of fiction."

By now, every gamer on the planet has downloaded the trailer for the next Metal Gear game, Guns of the Patriots. Snake has returned, older and more mustachioed, to a world where corporate greed fuels a war-driven economy. Private corporations are contracted for personal battles, which spawn further conflicts between the aggressors.

Perhaps it is Snake's age, but this time out he's got more at his disposal. At a Metal Gear anniversary event shortly after E3, Kojima revealed the toys and tricks of a 1080p Metal Gear Solid. Snake now has an aggressive camouflage system, dubbed the Octocam, which can sample patterns in Snake's surroundings to create near-invisibility. That's right; it's called the Octocam because it's like an octopus. Charming moniker, eh?

As always, Kojima's sense of humor is on display throughout the upcoming game. Guards, more lifelike than ever, crumple sleepily to the floor with haunting realism … only to be haloed in a cloud of cartoon Z's. When Snake needs a disguise, he might toss himself into a metal drum and roll it towards the enemy – but such rolling will leave our hero dizzy and disoriented to the point of vomiting. A skin mag is Snake's replenishment, and a tiny robot (Metal Gear MKII) is Snake's SIXAXIS-controlled sidekick. With much of the game set in the middle-east, Metal Gear Solid 4 is an unsettling piece of fiction, and many of the features feel like punch lines to a joke that hasn't been told.

American FPS fanatics put off by the stealthy gameplay of Metal Gear may be happy to know that the entire game can be played in First-Person Mode, at least in theory. Using the tilt-action of the Sony joystick, players can see through Snake's eyes for significant encounters. Much of the detail and subtlety of the game is lost in this mode, but it can't be beat for running-and-gunning.

As far as the legacy of Metal Gear is concerned, tiny moments in the trailer have fans drooling. From the bullet hole in Vamp's head, to Meryl's bullet-casing earrings, to the clothes that Ocelot is wearing, there's plenty of history on display in Guns of the Patriots. And despite rumors of a cross-platform, this is a PS3 exclusive … at least for now. Thank god it is. Sony needs something to keep that system from sinking like a brick. Hopefully between MGS4 and FFXIII, the installed user base will expand, and we can see what risks other developers are willing to take on the powerhouse.

**Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots** — preview

| | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | PS3 |
| Developer | Kojima Productions |
| Publisher | Konami |
| Available | 2008 |

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# Turok

## Love at first bite

**words** Heather Campbell

"Nobody really wants to shoot lasers."

The former black-ops commando, Joseph Turok, has been marooned on a wild and dangerous planet sometime in the future. His fellow soldiers of Whiskey Company are nowhere to be found, and he's low on ammo. What's worse, he is surrounded by dinosaurs, giant insects, and a squadron of human soldiers who have trained under the war criminal Roland Kane.

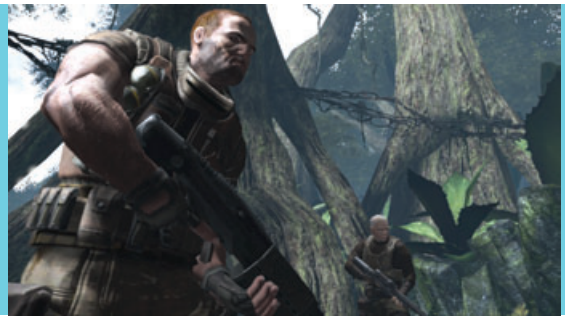
The developers of Turok want to remind us how awesome that first N64 Turok game was. How, despite the low polygon count, there was something very satisfying about exploring the fog-laden jungle and taking out velociraptors with a bow and arrow. And speaking of arrows, Propaganda Games has given every weapon a satisfying crunch by anchoring the weapons in a sort of modern recognizability. Nobody really wants to shoot lasers. Turok's weapons are mostly heavy giant shotguns or grenade launchers. The result is organic, gross, and delightful. Sure, there are futuristic beams of energy that you can equip, but why would you want a bleep-bloom blaster when you've got a knife that you can slip into someone's back with a Quiet Kill? Even the dinosaurs are weapons in this game. After crushing a nest of eggs, Turok can lead the raptors to the enemy camp with dingo-luring flares. The soldiers run, shoot, and scream as angry momma raptor pounces … and the lucky few that get away can be taken out on the periphery. Affix a mine to that aforementioned velociraptor and you've got a running bomb with teeth. Set up proximity mines around camp, and Turok can sit back and watch.

But really, Turok is all about the grass. Sure, this isn't the first game to feature environment that reacts to weaponry, but damn does Propaganda do it well. Tossing a grenade into a field of long-bladed shrubbery, Joseph Turok waits for detonation. When a Mendel-Gruman soldier investigates, the grenade explodes. Your eyes want to watch the soldier's body as it flies into great arcs of red, but stay focused on the grass. Perfect waves of wind and energy cascade through the field, rippling it like water.

It's beautiful. And yeah, is it violent. Online multiplayer will be a given, but the question remains whether players will be able to play as man and beast. Up to 16 people can battle it out at the same time, but Propaganda was tight lipped about controlling Velociraptors. Still with an answer like, "I can't answer that right now," gamers can remain optimistic.

**Turok** E32007 preview

| | |
|---|---|
| **System(s)** | Xbox 360/PS3 |
| **Developer** | Propaganda Games |
| **Publisher** | Touchstone |
| **Available** | February 5, 2008 |



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# Halo 3

"Halo 3 remains a bit of an odd duck; next to nothing of its single-player adventure has been shown…"

Concerned Chiefly with shooting aliens in the face…

**words** Greg Orlando

Show me single player or kiss your ass goodbye!

hail to the Chief. Microsoft's juggernaut first-person shooter franchise Halo 3 is rapidly racing toward its release date, with the general consensus being that, yes, everything is right with the world.

It's become commonplace in the game industry to hype—and then overhype—a title to its breaking point and beyond. Yet Halo 3 remains a bit of an odd duck; next to nothing of its single-player adventure has been shown. Microsoft was forthcoming enough to let fans of the series playtest Halo 3's multiplayer maps for an online beta test, but has steadfastly refused to divulge details about the game's plot, its characters, and the conclusion of the trilogy.

It was only at this year's Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) that Microsoft showed off Halo 3's single-player mode. Yet even then the glimpse was only brief and the details antagonizingly lacking. Representatives from the game's developer, Bungie, were on hand during the Halo 3 demonstrations to run through a snippet of gameplay set on what may be Earth, in a location titled Sierra 117.

Minus a cut-scene to establish context, the demonstration began with Master Chief, some marine allies, and the alien Arbiter touching down on Sierra 117. Although stealth is probably a decent idea, this tactic was quickly abandoned for something a bit more chaotic. The Chief began to gun down his alien foes with abandon, sparking a frenzied melee between the alien Covenant and Master Chief and the Covenant Arbiter and their human allies.

Here, it was possible to see some of Halo 3's selling points. Under heavy fire, the Chief threw up a translucent bubble shield to protect himself. New artificial intelligence made it seem as if the marines were now viable killing machines instead of just electronic meat for the grinder, and there were special in-game moments where the Chief could alter, in some small way, the course of gameplay; it was possible to either rescue a marine from an alien brute's clutches or, through inaction, let the soldier be hurled to his death. The brief demonstration ended as the Chief acquired a chain gun and used it to assault a spectacularly huge alien ship called a Phantom.

The second half of the demonstration concerned itself with Halo 3's ability to record, and play back, game footage. In the game's theater mode, players will be able to replay battles with a camera that can roam freely or lock in on a particular player. From this mode, players can capture screen shots and even send portions of a film to their friends. It was during this time that Bungie revealed two more pieces of the puzzle in the form of a new desert-themed multiplayer map Sandtrap and a brand-new vehicle (a large-wheeled behemoth perfect for crushing smaller, punier modes of transport) in the Brute Chopper.

**Halo 3** E32007 preview

| | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | Xbox 360 |
| Developer | Bungie |
| Publisher | Microsoft |
| Available | September 25 |

This is why Halo 3 should be third person.

# Assassin's Creed

"It's quite exciting to feel unrestricted by a game world this complex and rich."

## You can run...

**words** Brady Fiechter

Getting your bearings, AC style

before even seeing the game in motion, one of the most enticing aspects to Assassin's Creed, for me, was its setting. In 1191 AD, an assassin named Altair is on the prowl through the Holy Land, contracted to kill various men of dubious power. One of the main cities Altair travels to is Jerusalem, and it is here where the game begins to reveal its visual wonder.

My first contact with Altair begins overlooking this tremendous city, high above the crowded streets filled with a people from a beautiful time so long ago. The view is striking, and a little daunting at first. The freedom to travel anywhere the eye can see is transformed by so much detail and activity. As a figure of uncommon grace and dexterity, Altair moves like a monkey through a jungle, leaping and climbing and bouncing from rooftop to rooftop. It's quite exciting to feel unrestricted by a game world this complex and rich.

The art in the game merges with practical design. Construction of the faces of the dense buildings had to be architecturally correct and free for interactivity. The artists couldn't just paint murals, instead having to focus on paying attention to level design and where Altair would need to find a grip or foothold to reach the next ledge. It's impressive, how facing up the side of a building draws your line of sight like a rock climber preparing to scale the side of a cliff.

Movement can be difficult to come to grips with at first. The control scheme is fairly involved, adding a multiplier with the right trigger to advance the basic steps. In combat, finishing moves, counter attacks, and rhythm-based combos are also complex and unique enough to give the game what, initially, would seem more than what was first expected.

When a mission of evidence gathering crescendos to a confrontation with the target in question, a chase will ensue. In pursuit of a slave driver named Talal, I was introduced to another of Assassin's Creed's selling points, the need for careful crowd interaction. People, who serve as gameplay obstacles more than set dressing, can be tossed aside, or gently persuaded to move, and your choice will definitely matter to the nearby guards and other townsfolk.

**Assassin's Creed** E32007 preview

| | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | PS3, Xbox 360 |
| Developer | Ubisoft Montreal |
| Publisher | Ubisoft |
| Available | November |

# Darksiders: Wrath of War

## The next big thing from THQ

**words** Casey Loe

> "...the developers actually cite Zelda as their true inspiration."

One of the joys of past E3's was wandering the halls and discovering promising games like BioShock and The Darkness that no one had ever even heard of before. Undiscovered gems were few and far between this year, but THQ's Darksiders managed to get our juices flowing as few other newly announced titles could. No offense, Wii Fit, but *this* is what E3 is supposed to be about.

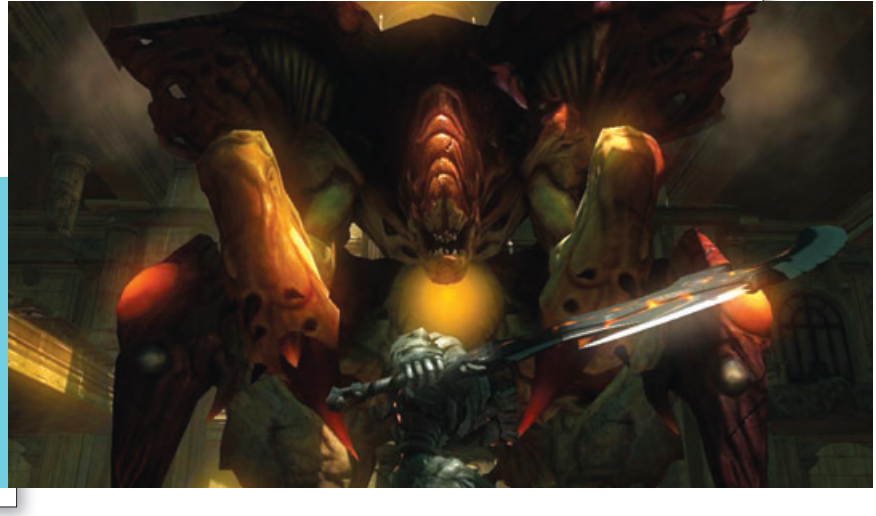
There's no shortage of next-gen games set in post-apocalyptic settings, but we like the twist in this one—as War of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, you're the one who caused all the destruction in the first place. With all those pesky human meatbags out of the way, the earth has been reduced to a battleground for the hosts of heaven and hell, leaving War to battle devils and angels alike as he strives to reclaim his lost powers and rejoin his fellow horsemen. (No word yet on if those other horsemen will be unlockable characters—I would love to go running around as Famine, spoiling the demons' Lunchables.)

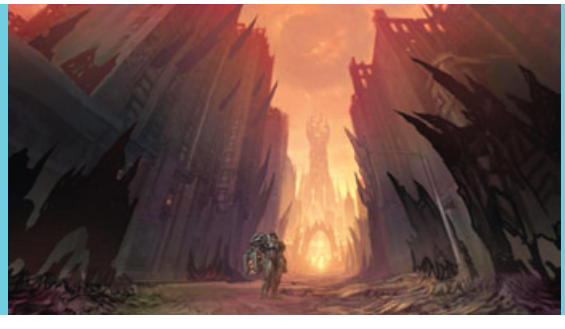
The environments and monster designs are looking excellent even at this early stage, and everything in Darksiders has a slightly Hellboy-ish comic-book vibe that sets it apart from the gritty realism of its contemporaries. Never mind the glamour shots—in real gameplay Darksiders bucks the trend of zooming in on your hero and pulls the camera farther back, giving an old-school shooter feel to large-scale battles and adding an impressive sense of scale to the screen-spanning bosses. The game mechanics look refreshingly varied: War's sword can dish out a variety of God of War-style combos, but he can also use a wide array of guns, and even make weapons out of environmental debris liked junked cards.

Instead of a typical level-clear structure, Darksiders provides a mostly open world full of barriers that can be cleared only when you acquire new weapons and abilities elsewhere in the game. Vigil Studios will be forced to fight a God-of-War-clone image as long as they stick with flashy melee combos and those tired QTE-style events (isn't that trend over *yet?),* but the developers actually cite Zelda as their true inspiration. On closer inspection, we can sort of see it—War can even fight astride his stallion, a horse made of magical ash that could totally kick Epona's ass. I'm a sucker for when developers invoke the Z-word, but even before that, Darksiders was looking like the surprise sleeper hit of E3. Don't hold the lack of competition against it.

**Darksiders: Wrath of War** E32007 preview

| | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | Xbox 360, PS3 |
| Developer | Vigil Studios |
| Publisher | THQ |
| Available | 2008 |



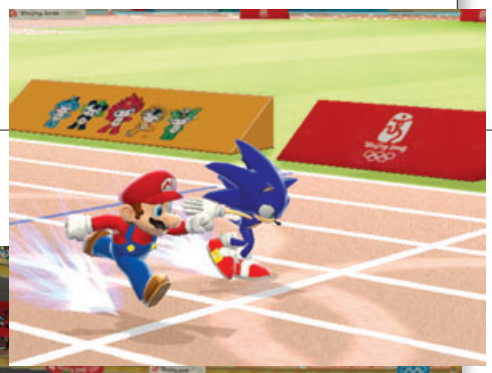


Joe Mad at your service...

# Mario & Sonic at the Olympic Games

## Chariots of fur?

**words** Greg Orlando



We all know who'd *really* win...

Game icons Sonic the hedgehog and Mario finally get to meet—and compete—in a lighthearted adventure meant to celebrate the 2008 Olympics.

Mario & Sonic at the Olympic Games answers the question that was literally in no one's mind: Who's faster, the lightning-quick Sonic or the overfed Italian plumber Mario? (In the spirit of fairness, Sonic is indeed quicker, but Mario is certainly a more well-rounded athlete with the ability to accelerate his speed rapidly.)

Four players will be able to compete in real-world Olympic games such as the 100-meter dash, the hammer throw, and the triple jump, as well as some crazy made-up competitions Sega has yet to reveal. Players will use the Wii remote in fairly standard ways to ensure the characters leap, swim, and race their way to the ever-elusive gold medal.

All told, there will be 20 events, and players can choose to play as heroes such as Mario's brother Luigi, Princess Peach, Knuckles the echidna, and Amy the hedgehog or as villains Bowser or Dr. Eggman. Each of the characters will have individual strengths and weaknesses, with Bowser, say, excelling in events requiring brute force, and rather sucking where finesse or simple speed is the key.

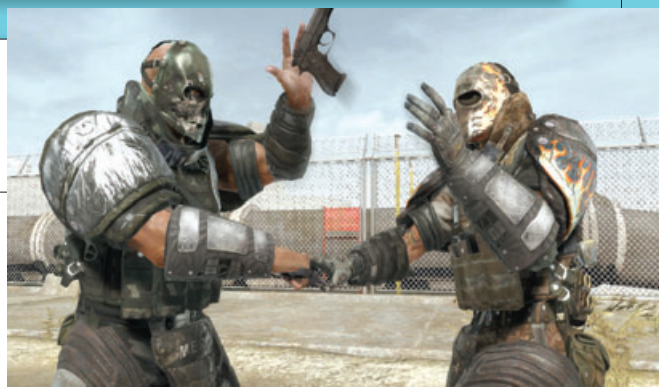
**Mario & Sonic at the Olympic Games** preview

| | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | Wii, Nintendo DS |
| Developer | Sega |
| Publisher | Sega |
| Available | Holiday 2007 |

# Army of Two

## Be all that you can be...in the Army of Two

**words** Greg Orlando



Army of 2 can be dissarming...

As one-half of the army of two, you'll be required to lift your partner (either computer-controlled or a human player) over obstacles, help him toss over concrete embankments to create cover; rip a truck's door off its hinges to scoot around with a portable bullet shield, drive a forklift with your pal on the lift, drag your ally to safety once he's absorbed enough punishment, save his life by (and this is by no means a joke) stuffing tampons into his wounds, and shooting everyone with a face in said face. For democracy.

Army of Two offers players endless opportunities to fight in a war where teamwork counts as much as firepower. The two need to work in tandem to complete missions and defeat enemies, and to this end the game uses a rather interesting feature where one of the two can collect "aggro" (short for aggravation), and thus become the target of enemy fire. The character without this aggro can then work in relative secrecy, creating flanking points and rushing to checkpoints. This system will also fuel special powerup attacks such as a pseudo bullet-time mode where attackers will move lightning fast in comparison to their foes.

**Army of Two** preview

| | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | PlayStation 3, Xbox 360 |
| Developer | Electronic Arts |
| Publisher | Electronic Arts |
| Available | November |

# Godzilla: Unleashed

## Wii will smash...

**words** Greg Orlando

The monster mash makes its debut on the Wii courtesy of Atari and Pipeworks Software. Godzilla: Unleashed brings the classic Japanese movie monster Godzilla home for an epic, world-smashing brawler. Unleashed holds a delightful 23-monster roster, including such favorites as Mechagodzilla, Anguirus, King Caesar, Godzilla 2000, Megalon, Mothra, Gigan, and King Ghidorah. A story mode allows players to choose a monster, take part in massive battles across nine different locales, and form alliances with other monsters. To this end Unleashed holds four separate and distinct factions (Earth defender, alien, mutant, and Global Defense Force), and a monster's alliances will certainly affect the way the storyline plays out.

A brief hands-on battle at E3 indicated Unleashed is certainly heading in the right direction. The Wii remote and nunchuk are used to pull off the game's fighting moves, with simple motions such as a quick thrust forward with the remote used to grab a monster and a flick to toss it against a building. Unleashed is, at heart, a flail-heavy title.

Crystals now fuel a new "critical mass" mode. When a monster collects enough crystal energy, it will begin to grow bright red and can execute powerful attacks such as nuclear pulses and fire surges. In short, Earth fall down, go boom.

| Godzilla: Unleashed E32007 preview | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | Nintendo Wii, Nintendo DS, PSP |
| Developer | Pipeworks |
| Publisher | Atari |
| Available | November |

# Fracture

## Fractured, but not broken...

**words** Greg Orlando

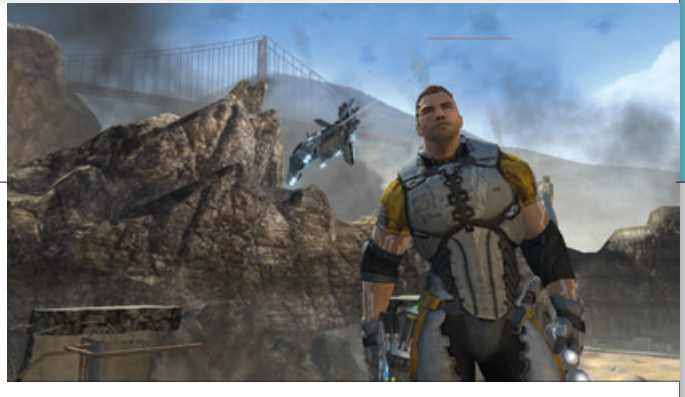
Here's what the future holds: death, global warming, civil war, cyborgs, and genetically enhanced mutants. Also, shooting. Lots of shooting.

LucasArts' Fracture offers third-person shooting with the possibility of altering the battlefield by deforming it. Hero Mason Briggs can toss special grenades to build up hills or create sinkholes, summon up huge rock spires, and create powerful vortexes to suck up any nearby friends, foes, or items. In addition, Briggs can access cool new weaponry such as a boulder gun that shoots, appropriately, huge chunks of rock at the opposition.

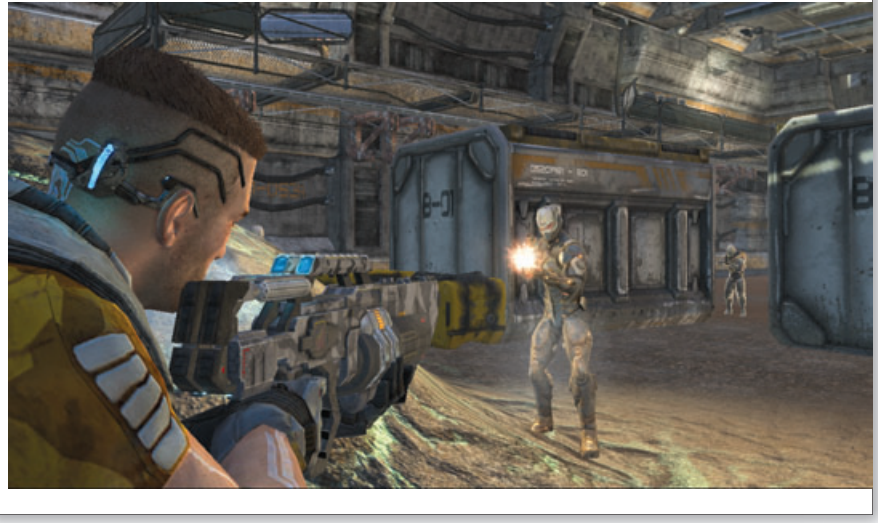
So far, LucasArts has only showed off Fracture's multiplayer modes, and they're delightfully chaotic. Players can use their Earth-shaping grenades to create groundswells to provide cover from gunfire, sink the terrain to gain access to subterranean areas, or huck a spike grenade and ride on top of the rapidly expanding stone formation to gain both a height and tactical advantage on the enemy. As they reap, so will they sow: Any deformations can be destroyed with gunfire or other grenades.

Fracture seems like right good fun, and its intriguing cyborgs vs. mutants storyline only adds to the game's mystique. Break the Earth but good next year.

| Fracture E32007 preview | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | Xbox 360, PlayStation 3 |
| Developer | Day 1 Studios |
| Publisher | LucasArts |
| Available | Summer 2008 |



Tales from topographic oceans.



# Silent Hill V

## Five for monster fighting...

**words** Greg Orlando

Not much is known about Silent Hill V, but one intriguing piece of news has surfaced: The game will be developed by The Collective, a California-based studio known for the excellent Buffy the Vampire Slayer for Xbox.

The game stars Alex Shepherd, a tortured war veteran whose family has been shattered. His mom has gone catatonic, and his father and brother have simply vanished. Shepherd foolishly decides to look for his brother and, of course, stumbles on the decidedly horrific town of Silent Hill—home to fog and monsters aplenty. Sharp-eyed fans of the third-person survival horror series have suggested Shepherd may be a relative—distant or otherwise—of Silent Hill 2's Mary Shepherd-Sunderland.

Konami recently introduced the game to fans via a trailer shown at this year's E3, an eerie one-minute teaser clip in which Shepherd noted, "They say you can't go home again. They're wrong; I just don't want to."

Noted music composer Akira Yamaoka, who will be providing the score for the game, has stated Silent Hill V will be more like Silent Hill 2 than the other games in the series. Whether this is a subtle jab at Silent Hill IV: The Room and its not-so-workable first-person sequences remains, certainly, to be seen.

**Silent Hill V** E32007 preview

| | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | PlayStation 3, Wii |
| Developer | The Collective |
| Publisher | Konami |
| Available | 2008 |

# Rock Band

## Hello, Cleveland...

**words** Greg Orlando

The yet-to-be grizzled, booze-addled, floozy-soaked members of Greg and the MagiTones (Or, quite possibly, The Great Sock Exhumation or The Bloody F-in' Snowmen) would like to thank Electronic Arts, Harmonix, and the rhythm-based music game Rock Band for, in no particular order: Gregapalooza, The Concert to Benefit Greg Orlando, eight months' worth of rehabilitation at the Betty Ford Center, their inevitable breakup, that unfortunate incident with the midget on the plane, more vomit than should be produced by one man with one functioning digestive system, the reunion tour, the copious selling out to corporate America, and the premature deaths by mishap of the lead singer and bassist.

Of Greg and the MagiTones, it will be said that they rocked and rocked hard—for up to 12 minutes at a time. And they could re-create, say, the entirety of The Who's seminal album Who's Next via Rock Band and Internet play without a single accidental overdose.

Internet play made them friends, but two plastic guitar controllers, a four-pad and one foot pedal drum set, and a microphone (plus Rock Band), made them a rock band—that, and a deep, abiding love for both appletinis and banging groupies.

**Rock Band** E32007 preview

| | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | PlayStation 3, Xbox 360 |
| Developer | Harmonix |
| Publisher | Electronic Arts |
| Available | Holiday season 2007 |

Greg is seeing triple again. Call the farm.

# Folklore

## The Republic of beautiful

**words** Casey Loe

Sony's year-end lineup may be truly stellar, but it's strangely devoid of first-party titles with an eastern flavor. When it comes to traditional gaming, the one and only Sony Japan offering is Game Republic's Folklore... and you know what? That's going to be just fine. We've spent some 30 hours with the Japanese version, and in the words of Play's own Nick Des Barres, "This is the best non-God of War II game I've played this year."

Folklore takes the concept of equipable enemy souls from the Soma Cruz Castlevania games (Aria and Dawn of Sorrow) and runs with it. Every single enemy populating the game's seven achingly beautiful worlds can and must be used as a weapon, with frequent mixing and matching of attack types and elemental properties required to advance: Call it a thinking man's third-person action game. In addition to some of the best art direction yet seen on next-gen and a sumptuous score by Kenji Kawai of Ghost In The Shell fame, Folklore packs a twist-filled story centering on the remote Irish village of Doolin, where it is said the living can meet the dead.

Folklore will be released in October in North America, and we pray it doesn't get lost amongst the Heavenly Swords and Uncharteds.

**Folklore** E32007 preview

| | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | PS3 |
| Developer | Game Republic |
| Publisher | SCEA |
| Available | October 2nd |

# Hellgate: London

## Open the gate already!

**words** Casey Loe

Everyone loved Diablo when it was released in the simpler era of 1996, but "Diablo-esque" is rarely used as a compliment these days. It implies a shallowness of gameplay that is somehow more addictive than it deserves to be, more a bag of chips than a nourishing meal. But Hellgate: London aims to build upon Diablo's legacy instead of coasting on its addictive charm, and Flagship have made the game's deeper elements the focus of its third and final E3 showing.

Most promising was a peek at some of the high-level missions, which go beyond the usual simple fetch and kill quests. One sent the heroes into the mind of a madman to battle elements of his psyche, while another displayed some creative solutions to high-level combat, which include recruiting NPC allies and triggering automated turrets. Our guide through these stages was a character of the Engineer class, which looks to have a little more depth than the usual gun-blazing marksmen and button-mashing swordsmen. It can tinker up companion bots to ferret out foes, tangle them up, or add heat-seeking rockets to your offense. With well-designed quests on top of the just-a-bit-more-loot addictive quality that Flagship has down pat, Hellgate: London might yet prove to be worth the wait. That is, if the wait doesn't grow longer still—the official release date is still summer '07, but there's no word on even a beta at this point, and no update on the 360 port rumors.

**Hellgate: London** E32007 preview

| | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | PC |
| Developer | Flagship |
| Publisher | Namco/EA |
| Available | Summer 2007 |

Hell has a damn good character designer.

# Age of Conan: Hyborian Adventures

## Barbarians are back

**words** Casey Loe

The long-awaited Conan MMORPG is finally taking shape, and quite a shape it is—30 varied regions totaling 185 square miles, each populated by vast hordes of demons, blood-thirsty tribes of barbarians, and an unusual number of scantily clad prostitutes.

The melee combat system has been repeatedly retooled, and now plays like something of a technical brawler, with multiple combat stances and branching combos. You can adjust your swing on the fly to slip under shields, stun with a blow to the head, or sever a limb that has particularly offended you. For once, MMORPG players will have to pay attention to even low-level combat, as auto-pilot is not an option. Other newly revealed features include a pet system, in which spellcasters can split a predetermined number of points among any number of summoned beasts, and branching skill trees reminiscent of Final Fantasy X's Sphere Grid.

Funcom and Eidos are on target for releasing the PC version on October 30, but details about next year's Xbox 360 version remain sparse—there's still no release date, and no decision has been made about shared servers or monthly fees.

| Age of Conan: Hyborian Adventures (E32007 preview) | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | PC, Xbox 360 |
| Developer | Funcom |
| Publisher | Eidos |
| Available | October 30 (PC) |

E32007

# Devil May Cry 4

## Would you like to know more?

It's going to get hot this winter.

**words** Casey Loe

While the RE5 trailer was stealing the show, the Devil May Cry team was dusting off last year's Tokyo Game Show trailer and putting it on display for a third time. It's been nearly a year since there's been any sort of substantive update on the title, making it all but certain that Devil May Cry 4 has slipped until early 2008.

But progress is being made—a recently released batch of shots reveal several new characters, all members of Fortuna City's Order of the Demon Sword. That puts them in the same faction as our hero, Nero, and on the opposite side of Demon Hunter Dante. But while Gloria's heaving bosom can't possibly be wrong, it's hard to imagine that the smugly monocled, dandily attired Agnus could possibly be a good guy. That suggests that Nero is beginning the game on the wrong side. That could make for a tantalizing twist, but it's nowhere near enough to get the needle moving on Devil May Cry 4 again. Get cracking on that downloadable demo, Capcom!

| Devil May Cry 4 (E32007 preview) | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | Xbox 360, PS3, PC |
| Developer | Capcom |
| Publisher | Capcom |
| Available | Winter |

# Viva Pinata: Party Animals

## Pinatas gone wild

**words** Casey Loe

between Fuzion Frenzy 2 (49% score on metacritic) and the Japan-exclusive Everyparty (barely 600 copies sold), the Xbox 360 market has not been an easy one for party games. Yet this combination of an unpopular genre and an underperforming license may be a triumph after all—those goofy piñatas have enough charm to make even the simplest games of hot potato and Simon Says appealing.

The one-button gameplay and automatic assists for poorly performing players will likely repel the hardcore audience that enjoyed Viva Pinata so very much, but Party Animals has everything it takes to score with families and children. It certainly won't hurt that the storylines and piñata personalities in this mini-game collection stick closer to the kid's cartoon than the original Viva Pinata ever did. After all, the Xbox 360 user base can't be composed entirely of childless single men, right? I mean… right?

**Viva Pinata: Party Animals** E32007 preview

| | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | Xbox 360 |
| Developer | Krome Studios |
| Publisher | Microsoft |
| Available | Fall 2007 |

As seen on TV!

E32007

# Pain

## No cure for Pain

**words** Greg Orlando

Oh, the delightful and malevolent fun you will have with but a giant slingshot and little electronic people to shoot it from.

Pain will win no awards for best game at the 2007 Electronic Entertainment Expo. It won't be part of anyone's "perfect storm" of blockbuster game titles. It won't even see release in stores; Sony's opted to distribute the game via download through the PlayStation network.

What Pain is, simply, is goofy to the core. You'll take a human slingshot and shoot it out into a series of wholly destructible environments. The goal, of course, is to chain together the most outlandish series of painful events and cause the most havoc possible.

This means that players will get to, say, shoot a guy in a cow suit up toward a streetlight, grab onto it and swing merrily about, launch him downward through a series of plate- glass windows and onto a street with oncoming traffic where the body will be struck and rocketed toward an explosive barrel causing more devastation and creating the opportunity for added mischief. The game then, at once, becomes a playground for the sick and twisted, and riding its demented teeter-totter seems jolly good fun.

**Pain** E32007 preview

| | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | PS3 |
| Developer | Idol Minds |
| Publisher | Sony |
| Available | Fall 2007 |

Looks like we have a vacancy after all...

# Little Big Planet

## Get happy

**words** Brady Fiechter

Little Big blooming.

Little Big Planet continues to bring big smiles with its wonderfully inventive do-it-yourself platforming and adorably vivid stage design. Most of what has been revealed on the game consists of bits and pieces the designers have stitched together for teaser consumption—that alone is enough to show qualities of something really special going on. But finally toying around with original creations—the whole idea of Little Big Planet is to let your imagination run wild inside this playful virtual erector set—is what defines the final appeal. Creating a character and toying with chunks of the level is especially satisfying, thanks to the spontaneity of the actions and the little physical cues that give everything a tangible, real-world quality; it really is a remarkable sensation watching objects interact with each other as you drop stuff in. While the results of your craftsmanship look like they can be pretty complex, the process of getting there is nicely intuitive and doesn't require a lot of fumbling around in clumsy menus. We'll see just how clever you can actually be in Little Big Planet, but the promise of fashioning actually working mechanisms from your parts seems too neat to be fully realized. Then again, Little Big Planet seems too good to be true anyways.

**Little Big Planet** E32007 preview

| | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | PS3 |
| Developer | Media Molecule |
| Publisher | SCEA |
| Available | 2008 |

# Medal of Honor Airborne

## Chute to kill

**words** Brady Fiechter

Some of us still prefer linear gameplay and its scripted energy over open-world choice, where you often just feel like you're meandering, and the gameplay focus seems fractured. It's the idea of open-world freedom that certainly holds grandeur, but from certain perspectives, no one has figured out how to tap those riches.

In Medal of Honor Airborne, it's the idea that's certainly very interesting: as the title infers, you play as a unit of the 82nd Airborne division, and at the start of each of the nine levels, parachute into the battlefield. You're free to land wherever you want, into the thick of battle, going it alone, or perhaps at a more secure spot where allies can absorb the pressure. Skirmishes are raging all around you, independent of where you choose to start. The levels are dominated by vertical design, which is not a choice you often find in an FPS. The compact nature of the setting, at least in theory, could provide a nice alteration to the typical gameplay of the series.

**Medal of Honor Airborn** E32007 preview

| | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | PS3, Xbox 360, PC |
| Developer | EA LA |
| Publisher | EA |
| Available | August |

# Ratchet & Clank: Tools of Destruction

## Platforming evolved

**words** Brady Fiechter

Somebody pinch us.

It hasn't been confirmed if there will be a weapon in Ratchet & Clank: Tools of Desruction that turns enemies into sheep, but there's definitely a weapon that transforms the unsuspecting hoards into penguins. The penguins become dancing penguins if you decide to unleash the Groovatron, which induces disco-fever through its hypnotizing light show.

Ratchet & Clank: Tools of Destruction is after the blithe humor you would expect from a cartoon, and apparently wants to look just as good as an animated feature in the process. It's the sophistication and depth of animation that really makes this game look like it belongs on 35-mm film more than game hardware. I've always admire Insomniac's uncanny sense of design and subtleties, and seeing that talent bolstered by the PlayStation 3 made me a very, very happy Ratchet fan.

If you've followed the series, plenty familiarity of control and structure will greet you out the gate. The weapons play sounds like it's fairly obvious for the series—we'll see where it goes toward later levels—but a new emphasis on more environmental interaction and chaos is what really catches my eye. The shifting camera work and dramatic framing of the action is so freaking cool, what might seem like standard platforming ideas are like experiencing a genre for the first time.

**Ratchet & Clank: Tools of Destruction** E32007 preview

| | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | PS3 |
| Developer | Insomniac |
| Publisher | SCEA |
| Available | Winter |

# TimeShift

## It's about time...

**words** Brady Fiechter

Time to die...

The way TimeShift's producer tells the story, the original game was pretty much done and ready to ship right when he sent in a plea to scrap and rebuild. The powers-that-be agreed, and what you see here is the "new-and-improved?" TimeShift. I suppose you could say the game "looks" better, what with obvious improvements in some important areas. But I have to say, I miss the more fantastical, colorful lean of the original vision.

The story stays on course, with Dr. Krone still betraying his team of time-suit experimenters and fleeing to rule in an alternate universe. Here is where you'll time travel as well to catch up with Krone, locate weapons, join forces with the oppressed, and blow everything up. Doing so involved the manipulation of time, with slow, stop, and reverse comprising the primary functions of your time-traveling suit.

Other than the straight fact that 16 players can get online for the usual group blasting, not a lot has been shown for multiplayer. Obviously the time-manipulation dynamic could give way to some cool ideas…

**Timeshift** E32007 preview

| | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | PS3, Xbox 360, PC |
| Developer | Saber Interactive |
| Publisher | Sierra |
| Available | October |

# Fallout 3

## Fall into adventure

**words** Brady Fiechter

Post-apocalyptic dread: always a welcome sight for a game! In Fallout 3, nuclear war has left few survivors, forcing most human life left on the surface to venture into safehouses underground. Washington, DC, lovingly known as the Capital Wasteland, contains one of these protective residencies—Vault 101. Your stay in this less-than-luxurious box is about end, as the game follows a path from here to the pestilent streets and beyond.

I would argue that the last good Fallout was the original one, released a decade ago. Oblivion developer Bethesda seems to agree as they showcased Fallout 3, demonstrating an understanding of what defined the appeal of the first Fallout. Moving through the crumbled landscape can be framed in either third- of first-person, and unlike Oblivion, the third-person angle actually looks pleasing.

A ton of character development and interaction with the many inhabitants is in the works. This is as much role-playing as it is combat, and even that aspect of Fallout 3 is being handled quite interestingly. A system called SPECIAL—Strength, Perception, Endurance, Charisma, Intelligence, Agility, and Luck—tracks your character growth, directly affecting how well you do in battle. A targeting system, called VATS, places the enemy into a frozen state, during which you can link up attacks and nail targeted body parts.

**Fallout 3** E32007 preview

| | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | Xbox 360, PS3, PC |
| Developer | Bethesda |
| Publisher | Bethesda |
| Available | TBA |

# Soul Calibur Legends

## The Wii has Soul

**words** Brady Fiechter

In my brief moments with Soulcalibur Legends, it was my wrists that burned more than my soul as I whirled and twitched and yanked and poked, in no particular order. I'm not quite sure if my movements with the Wiimote and Nunchuck translated properly to the character's actions onscreen, but they at least looked devastating in the process.

As you progress through Soulcalibur Legends, enhancing your main weapon along the way, you can switch between two characters at will. For my brief time with the straightforward demo, I was actually surprised that I could pull of some fairly advanced moves as I got used to the controls. A lock-on technique was very welcome given the full-range of 3D movement and nature of the gameplay. Perhaps I'm hoping for more than is necessary, but given the dramatic impact this series has held since the beginning, the area I battled through, including the lizard men and their Egyptian boss man, left a lot to be desired. Such is the bane of short E3 demos, so as always, time will tell…

**Soulcalibur Legends** E32007 preview

| | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | Wii |
| Developer | Namco Bandai |
| Publisher | Namco Bandai |
| Available | 2007 |

# Haze

## Radical behavior

**words** Brady Fiechter

Whose side are you on?

There's something about a Free Radical first-person shooter that feels removed from its peers. It's not necessarily markedly superior, just very specific and nuanced in movement and form. Even the overlooked Second Sight captured the developer's distinct sensibilities, despite being removed from the Time Splitters run-and-gun formula. It grabs me.

Look at Haze, and you're looking at a Free Radical game—a game that promises a lot more ambition and substance than the almost-great Time Splitters. These guys know how to stage a first-person shootout, and here the tension is on high just watching.

It's easy to reach to Call of Duty 4 and Killzone 2 for quick shots of adrenaline, but the more I see Haze, the more I'm appreciating its nuances and interesting gameplay setups. A lot of hype is being placed on the Nectar enhancements and how they play into the implications of the narrative. It's here that the game clearly has a one-up on the competition. One new revelation is that you'll be switching sides, playing from a perspective that now knows specific weaknesses—and emotional vulnerabilities, perhaps?

There's no doubt Haze is onto something at least good. The inclusion of four-player co-op doesn't hurt.

| Haze | E32007 preview |
|---|---|
| System(s) | PS3, Xbox 360, PC |
| Developer | Free Radical |
| Publisher | Ubisoft |
| Available | November |

# Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare

## Everything but the pain

**words** Brady Fiechter

This won't hurt a bit.

I have no interest in the theme of war, or soldiers, or special-ops, or whatever. And yet I continue to play and love first-person shooters, especially the ones about war and soldiers and special-ops. The lack of anything inspired in the genre is a little depressing, yet a simple fact that's not changing anytime soon. Due in no small part to the fact that I'm still anxiously awaiting the next one.

I play these games because the best in the genre—Call of Duty included—are so well crafted, visually strong, and represent a style of gameplay I quite enjoy. I will play Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare, because a) it will play great, even if it's more of the same thing, and I will get that rush I expect and want from a good FPS; and b) this is the one game at E3 I am most curious to see running on my TV, for purely spectacle reasons. There is a reason the audience clapped several times during the game's reveal, and it ain't for the "whatever" depictions of war, and not for how excitingly original it looked to open a hatch and send a high-calibur rifle into another human's flesh.

There may be other games as visually captivating as Call of Duty 4—Ratchet & Clank is one—but its source of realism is more outright impressive. This game stole the show for a lot of people.

| Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare | E32007 preview |
|---|---|
| System(s) | PS3, Xbox 360, PC |
| Developer | Infinity Ward |
| Publisher | Activision |
| Available | November |

# Lost Odyssey

## Dial I for Immortality

**words** Greg Orlando

You must work out...

Hironobu Sakaguchi was on hand when Microsoft showed off his new role-playing game Lost Odyssey at E3. Sakaguchi, the famed creator of Final Fantasy, looked confident as someone else test-drove the game, and didn't bother to step into the limelight until it was time to field questions from game writers.

Call that grace under pressure. Microsoft is banking heavily on Odyssey, desperately wishing the game will turn on Japanese game fans to the Xbox 360; To say the Xbox 360 could use some help in Japan is an understatement.

In Odyssey, Sakaguchi has created a quintessential Japanese RPG. The hero, Kaim, is a anguished soul, a near-immortal with really exaggerated hair, fighting as part of a single cog in an epic war. The graphics are, of course, as realistic as the technology will allow and the fighting is turn-based. It's very beautiful, packed with a sweeping storyline, and augmented by set pieces like a vaguely futuristic train on which the lead character and his pals will have to battle huge gun turrets and, eventually, an even bigger boss.

The English voice acting had recently been inserted into the game, and all bodes well for a holiday season release. There may be some genuine concern that Sakaguchi and Mistwalker are playing it safe with Odyssey, but at least the game offers up such intriguing notions as a five-man battle party and an art style to pop eyes over.

| Lost Odyssey E32007 preview | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | Xbox 360 |
| Developer | Mistwalker |
| Publisher | Microsoft |
| Available | October |

# The Simpsons

## Quite the Cromulent Preview

**words** Greg Orlando

The Simpsons have not been America's favorite family when it comes to video games. Bart, Homer, and etc. have gotten the rough treatment in titles such as Bart Versus the Space Mutants, The Simpsons Wrestling, The Simpsons Road Rage. Now, however, a delicious wind has swept over Springfield, USA, as Electronic Arts plans to release The Simpsons, an adventure that has the long-running animated sitcom family discovering that Lo! they are characters in a video game. Players will get to control two Simpsons per stage, and can shift back between either at will.

The game employs a beautiful cel-shaded style, and cuts right to the heart of the matter by making fun of games such as Medal of Honor and the Grand Theft Auto games. Moreover, the game will also insert various clichés into the mix, and rewards players when they discover them (100 coins, anyone?).

At E3, the game looked perfectly fine, although some heads were scratched when Electronic Arts proclaimed that players controlling Lisa had access to a "hand of Buddha" superpower, which lets the genius second-grader control a huge hand from a top-down perspective, dropping rocks on enemies, and manipulating the world to solve puzzles.

| The Simpsons E32007 preview | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, Wii, DS, PSP |
| Developer | Electronic Arts |
| Publisher | Electronic Arts |
| Available | Fall 2007 |

# NiGHTS: Journey of Dreams

## Dream delight, take 2

**words** Heather Campbell

As beautiful as NiGHTS: Into Dreams for the Saturn is, the poor game doesn't age too well. Unlike sprite-based games, early polygon titles seem dated after just a few years. Your memory of how good NiGHTS looked is probably a little forgiving. That is, of course, if you even played it to begin with.

NiGHTS for the Wii is going to fix all that. Coming out on Nintendo's chart-conquering system, the flying/racing/adventure game is sure to find a larger audience. And for those of us who played the original, the new title plays like we recall, and looks as good as we remember. The world of Nights is 3D, but the gameplay is primarily 2D. Flying with NiGHTS is accomplished via the Wiimote alone, or with both nunchuck and wand at the same time. Players guide the purple jester through the air as the background moves past on rails. Infrequently, the perspective changes and places the camera behind NiGHTS, and gameplay switches to a style not unlike Sonic and the Secret Rings.

For me, the best news is that the music is by Naofumi Hataya, original composer from NiGHTS: Into Dreams. The levels end with the same sweet theme, cementing the feeling that NiGHTS has returned.

**NiGHTS: Journey of Dreams** E32007 preview

| | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | Wii |
| Developer | Sega |
| Publisher | Sega |
| Available | Fall 2007 |

NiGHTS and the Wiimote; a match made in heaven.

# Guitar Hero III

## Battle of the band members

**words** Heather Campbell

Neversoft is not going to try and reinvent the wheel with Guitar Hero III. The same features that have made GH2 such a party favorite remain embedded in GH3, but Actvision's new team of developers are stretching out some novel ideas in an effort to cement the game's status in the living room.

Chief among these new features is battle mode. Inspired by the antics of games like Mario Kart, Neversoft is bringing aggressive, attack-style gameplay to Guitar Hero in a new head-to-head mode. Playing a rock battle is not for those with an accuracy fetish; by using power-ups like "Broken String," and "Lefty Flip," players force one another to miss notes with increased difficulty.

Also noteworthy is the larger selection of original recordings (and some new re-recordings, like "Cult of Personality"), as well as the inclusion of celebrity guitarists like Slash (Guns and Roses, Velvet Revolver). Single-player mode is punctuated by face-offs against rock giants, who compete in the style of battle mode. Slash is not just a name tacked onto the avatar—apparently, the hat-wearing rockstar came into the studio for motion capture and input.

For those put off by the track list of former Guitar Hero titles, GH3 includes more than 70 tracks—so even the most uninformed musicians can find something to jam to.

**Guitar Hero III** E32007 preview

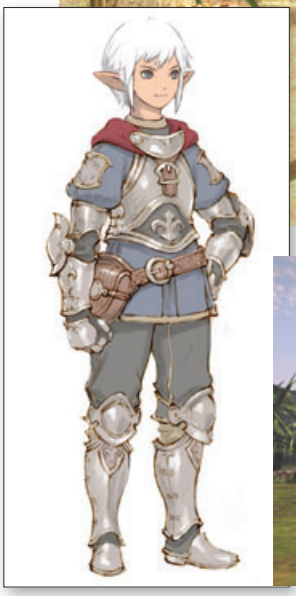
| | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | PS2, PS3, 360, Wii |
| Developer | Neversoft |
| Publisher | Activision |
| Available | October 28, 2007 |

Axe-citing new next-gen models!

# Final Fantasy XI: Wings of the Goddess

MMOre of the same...

**words** Heather Campbell



It has been more than five years since Square released Final Fantasy XI in Japan. Since then, the MMO genre has been transformed by the runaway success of World of Warcraft. Yet, according to the developers at S-E, FFXI has not experienced the mass exodus that so many other online RPGs have suffered. Maybe it's due to the near total shutdown of inflation problems, or maybe it's due to the hardcore group dynamics that define the title, or perhaps it's the platform-agnostic play. Whatever the case, the game continues to be such a success that a new expansion has been announced. Wings of the Goddess will be the fourth expansion pack brought out for FFXI. With details still vague, many players will have to wait for the upcoming second Final Fantasy XI Fan Festival for announcements about new jobs and areas. What we do know is that the expansion features time-travel prominently and players can travel back to the past of Vana'diel, adventuring through familiar ruined landmarks that have been restored to their original glory. Content will not be capped (as in Chains of Promathia), but instead will be both end-game and early-level play. Developers don't see players mass-migrating to a new area (as was the case in Treasures of Aht Urhgan), but rather keeping their home points where they are now ....

**Final Fantasy XI: Wings of the Goddess** E32007 preview

| | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | PS2/360/PC |
| Developer | Square Enix |
| Publisher | Square Enix |
| Available | Winter 2007 |

# Hellboy

Mignolas maniac

**words** Dave Halverson

Punch him back October 16th.

There's a reason that Microsoft bequeathed development duties of the new Viva Piñata game to Australia's Krome Studios; they're the real deal. I told you so back when I was the lone voice pushing Ty the Tasmanian Tiger, but soon everyone will realize what I've been spouting, because Hellboy is simply superb. Seeing the game at E3 most of the chinks I spotted during my hands-on for our cover story have already been addressed, and what's been added since looks absolutely brilliant. And it couldn't happen to a nicer hell spawn. It's about time we got a superhero without a wee bulge and fruity tights. The adventure at hand emphasizes everything that the 360 and PS3 are about and does so with some explosive new gameplay mechanics and puzzles that set the game apart from the pack as much if not more than the film differed from rubbish like Superman. Now someone make me a Lobo game!

**Hellboy** E32007 preview

| | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | Xbox 360, PS3 |
| Developer | Krome Studios |
| Publisher | Konami |
| Available | Oct 16 |

# Naruto: Rise of a Ninja

## Anime based gaming finally arrrives

**words** Dave Halverson

Being Naruto has its advantages.

every time I lay eyes on Ubisoft's Naruto game I still can't believe how badly it stomps on not only every anime-based game, which really isn't saying much, but most every adventure as well. Rise of a Ninja possesses a heretofore unseen level of seamlessness as to where the animation ends and the game begins. By taking what cel-shading did for cartoon- inspired 3D on the last-generation and perfecting it for the new generation they've created the world's first living cartoon in every sense of the word. But simply reinventing the look wasn't enough; they had to go and combine role playing, fighting and platforming, making each their own along the way to brilliant ends. The end result? …Heaven on a disc, especially if you're a fan. If not, I highly suggest investing in an unrated box set or two and getting up to speed.

**Naruto: Rise of a Ninja** E32007 preview

| | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | Xbox 360 |
| Developer | Ubisoft |
| Publisher | Ubisoft |
| Available | October 16 |

E32007

# The Eye of Judgment

## Something special this way comes

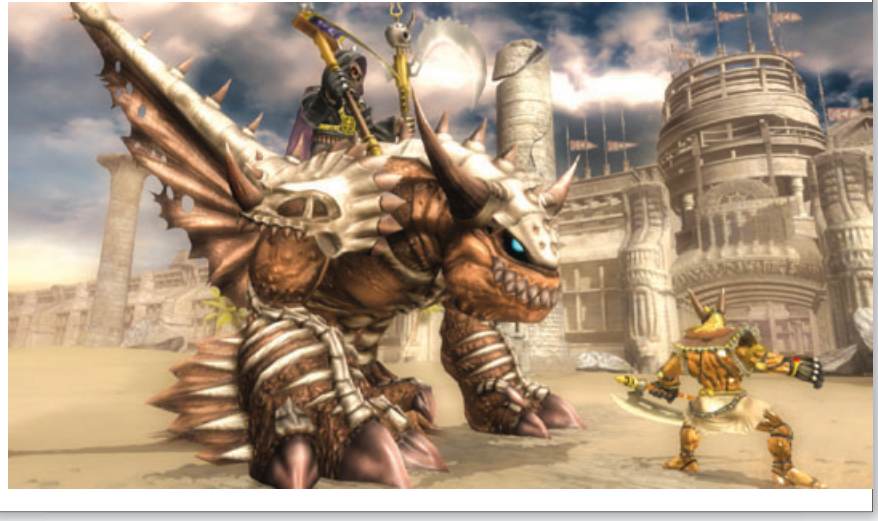
**words** Dave Halverson

Sometimes a picture really is worth a thousand words.

you want a gimmick? One that makes WiiFit look like your grand pappy's walker? Well, here you go. Behold the new sensation of the next generation; a game that doesn't merely enhance a current genre or gameplay model, but reinvents it, creating an experience unlike anything in all of gamedom… The Eye of Judgment. My inner geek goes completely mental every time I see this game and it just keeps looking more and more phenomenal. My personal dream beyond this wave of consoles being holographic gaming, The Eye of Judgment is the closest I'll likely ever get. Albeit viewed through a lens, you're able to hold a beast in the palm of your hand and have it react to your prodding. That my friends, is progress. There's a great card battle RPG within, that utilizes actual cards, transforming the playing surface into a real-time medieval battle field. Now you can be just like those über nerds parked at card tables in your local comic shop, only no one has to know! The Wii isn't the only console with innoavtive control; no way!

**The Eye of Judgment** E32007 preview

| | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | PS3 |
| Developer | SCEJ |
| Publisher | SCEA |
| Available | Oct. 01 |



# Resident Evil 5

## How old your new console will be when you play it

**words** Casey Loe

His hair may be grey in the final version.

New footage of RE5 was one of the big shocks of E3, as it seemed to imply that Capcom had concluded the traditionally lengthy "make a nearly finished version, scrap it, and start again" phase of Resident Evil development. Indeed, in screenshots and interviews that followed, producer Jun Takeuchi made it clear that the team had settled on a style ("like Resident Evil 4, but with a significant twist"), an urban African setting, and a cast of characters lead by Chris Redfield of RE1 and Code: Veronica fame.

So what is this gameplay twist? "If we gave that away, we'll have nothing to talk about next year," Takeuchi told Japanese magazine Famitsu, but hints at a connection between the new mechanic and the attractive blonde woman who appears in the trailer. Could this be a grown-up Sherry Birkin from Resident Evil 2, who carried a dormant form of the G-Virus, and was last reported to be in Wesker's custody? The timeline works out—RE5 takes place at least a decade after RE2, when Sherry was 12 years old. So when will we finally get to play it?

An answer of sorts can be found in one version of the trailer, which ends with the years 2008, 2009, and 2010 flickering across the screen. So there you go; a firm commitment from Capcom to release it sometime within the next three years. I bet Kojima wishes he had thought of that.

| Resident Evil 5 (E32007 preview) | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | Xbox 360, PS3, PC |
| Developer | Capcom |
| Publisher | Capcom |
| Available | Not anytime soon |

# Stranglehold

## Hong Kong cine-matic

**words** Heather Campbell

Never mess with the man on the marquee.

I'm not going to even attempt to contain my excitement about Stranglehold. Developed under the guidance of John Woo, Stranglehold is the sequel to one of the best action movies of all time, Hard Boiled. Tequila, played by Chow Yun Fat, tramples through Hong Kong and Chicago on the trail of criminals that have kidnapped his girl. John Woo films are the genesis of bullet time, so it's a no-brainer that players will be able to enter "Tequila Time," a slow motion mode that plays like Max Payne or Enter the Matrix.

The environments are extraordinarily destructible, with tables and shelves disintegrating into dust. Tequila doesn't leap. He dives. A little strangely, our hero slides across every waist-high surface he encounters—giving the game a silly yet stylized finish. Special attacks follow single bullets across the screen until they tear through bad guys, and fancy environment-specific attacks (like shooting neon signs till they crash to the earth) take out multiple villains at once.

And the PS3 release will include a Blu-Ray special edition of Hard Boiled, meaning this journalist is going to have to find five hundred bucks before August. Assuming I can't get my hands on the Sony machine, the 360 version will have behind-the-game featurettes and exclusive content as well.

| Stranglehold (E32007 preview) | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | PS3/360 |
| Developer | Midway Games |
| Publisher | Midway Games |
| Available | August 6, 2007 |

# Fable 2

## Beyond Legendary

**words** Greg Orlando

Having already established himself as video games' favorite kook, developer Peter Molyneux once again hopped on the bus to Crazyville.

The second of Fable 2's great innovations (the first was, of course, the introduction of a canine companion for the game's hero) will be a one-button control scheme for the weapons. Instead of needing to memorize button combinations to create different attacks, players will simply need to get the hang of timing their button presses. Or, if they just want to hack-and-slash, Fable 2 will accommodate them. It will be possible to beat Fable 2 by button mashing, Molyneux says, but doing so ensures a hero will be less cool. A proper hero, one who masters things like parrying, using the game environments as a weapon, and performing elaborate kills, will gain more experience and have access to more, well, cool things in Fable 2. Molyneux also used the joyous occasion known as the Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) to discuss death in his role-playing game. In a rather novel twist, heroes in Fable 2 will be saved from death, but at a price. A hero must pay a penalty (either in gold or experience) or suffer a scar when he or she dies.

**Fable 2** E32007 preview

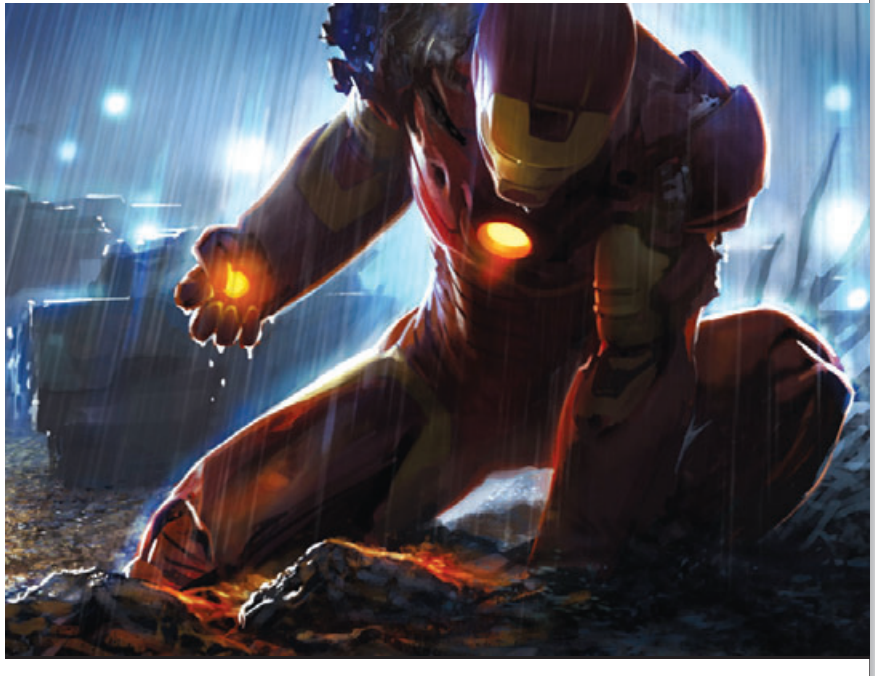
| | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | Xbox 360, PC |
| Developer | Lionhead |
| Publisher | Microsoft |
| Available | 2008 |

E32007

# Iron Man

## Does whatever an armored behemoth can

**words** Greg Orlando



Millionaire inventor Tony Stark has battled the Viet Cong; supervillains such as the Mandarin, Radioactive Man, and the Titanium Man; and alcoholism. He has scored more women than any fictional character save for perhaps James Bond. Stark is Marvel Comics' Iron Man, a longstanding hero whose adventures began in the 1960s. Next year, Iron Man's story will be told in a big-budget Hollywood film and, fittingly, a next-generation adventure courtesy of Sega and developer Secret Level.

Sega showed off Iron Man at the Electronic Entertainment Expo in July, highlighting a stage set in the icy wastes of Siberia. The third-person adventure seemed fairly straightforward, with Iron man able to hover vertically for short distances or fly for extended periods in a more traditional, horizontally aligned fashion. As befitting a technological marvel, Iron Man can also access powerful repulsor rays, a chest beam, and a series of missiles, which can be upgraded as Stark gains access to more and better electronics. A neat bit of gameplay allowed Iron Man to toss missiles back to their sender or rip the turrets off of tanks to use as a bludgeon.

As for the rest, well, time will tell. Iron Man takes flight next year.

**Iron Man** E32007 preview

| | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | Xbox 360, PS3, P2, Wii, DS, PSP, PC |
| Developer | Secret Level |
| Publisher | Sega |
| Available | 2008 |

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## Bioshock

There is no doubt that BioShock will be good, just as there is no doubt that this was last year's, and this year's, E3 game of the show. The more I play, the more I discover how dark and bleak the game seems to be, how gorgeous and original the setting is, how much classic fun even the little puzzles are to hack into a machine. The one thing that might deaden BioShock is that my expectations are too high.

| | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | Xbox 360, PC |
| Developer | Irrational Games |
| Publisher | 2K Games |
| Available | August |

## Skate

While the game industry drama of the year is surely EA's Rock Band targeting Activision's Guitar Hero franchise, the same story is playing out on a smaller scale as EA's "skate" targets the long-coasting Tony Hawk franchise. Developer Black Box is taking no chances, seeking to differentiate itself from the Hawk series in everything from structure to play mechanics to title capitalization. So far the biggest hits are the dual analog controls (one stick for movement, one stick for tricks), which feel fresh and well-reasoned, if not exactly pick-up-and-playable, and an achievement-packed Crackdown-esque open world that always offers plenty to do. But I'm a little less thrilled with the low-slung camera that puts your skater's ass front-and-center; if ever a game needed the option to build a female character, it's this one. And you know what, EA? I'm calling it Skate with a capital S. You're not powerful enough to change long-standing rules of capitalization. Yet.

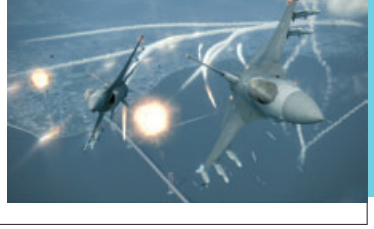
Such unpleasantness aside, it's hard not to predict big things from Skate. The yearly Tony Hawk iterations have left us hungry from something new, and while it's way too early to compare quality, Skate definitely fits that bill.

| | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | Xbox 360, PS3 |
| Developer | EA Black Box |
| Publisher | EA Games |
| Available | September 11th |

## Ace Combat 6: Fires of Liberation

Ace Combat 6: Fires of Liberation feels like what you'd expect from flying these awesome planes in the series, but the mission structure is a bit different this time around, offering submissions and more freedom to decide where you want to focus your efforts first. Secure, say, a runway, and you get added options for supplies during a run.

| | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | Xbox 360 |
| Developer | Project Aces |
| Publisher | Namco |
| Available | October |



## Robert Ludlum's The Bourne Conspiracy

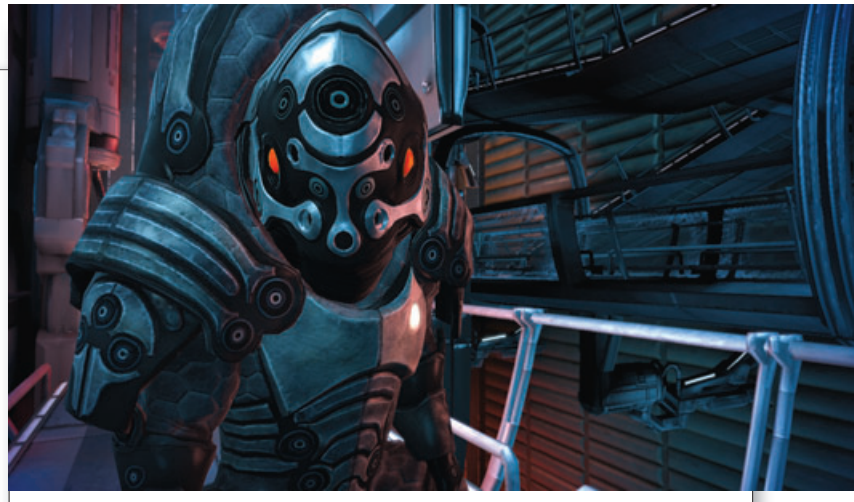
Darkwatch developer High Moon Studios introduces Bourne Conspiracy, an action game that draws from the movies and the books. Hand-to-hand combat is a big part of the gameplay, and when it's time to shoot, the emphasis will be on more believable elements that rely on Bourne's resourceful skills.

| | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | PS3, Xbox 360 |
| Developer | High Moon |
| Publisher | Sierra |
| Available | 2008 |

## Infamous

an extremely short yet enticing video is all we get for Infamous, the first game for Sucker Punch after moving away from Sly Cooper. Superhero influences abound; the main character is larger than life, tossing around heavy objects and shooting lightning from his fingertips. The loose "open-world" moniker has been applied.

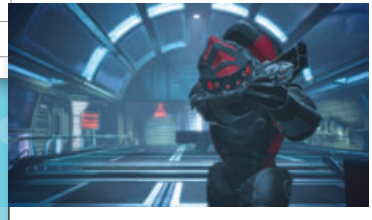
| | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | PS3 |
| Developer | Sucker Punch |
| Publisher | SCEA |
| Available | 2008 |

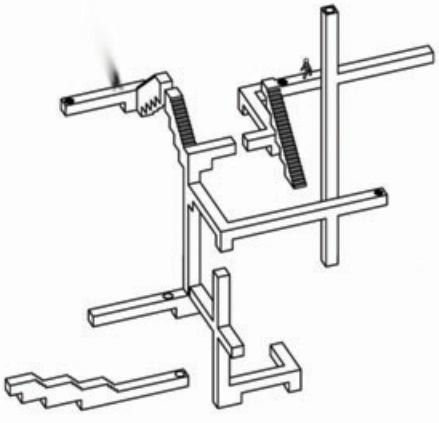


## Mass Effect

what more need be said? This futuristic Xbox 360 game looks brilliant, features a sweeping storyline, and forces players to make a series of moral choices in order to save the galaxy. November can't arrive fast enough, and this was, simply, one of the best games at this year's E3.

| | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | Xbox 360 |
| Developer | BioWare |
| Publisher | Microsoft |
| Available | November |





## Echochrome

this was the little game that could, a minimalist puzzler featuring a series of black-and-white line drawings and a little modeling doll who maneuvers his way through a series of craftily constructed 3D line drawings/optical illusions. Manipulating the camera alters the perspective and the game world, allowing the doll to continue his movement. Brilliant!

| | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | PS3 |
| Developer | Sony |
| Publisher | Sony |
| Available | Marc 2008 |

## Spider-man: Friend or Foe

activision has turned around a second massively multi-platform Spider-man in record time, but this one has little resemblance to the half-hearted movie tie-in of just a few months ago. Instead of aiming for open-world realism, Friend or Foe focuses on the simpler pleasures of co-op brawling with cartoony visuals and simplified controls.

Friend or Foe probably isn't targeted at your particular demographic, but there are a few reasons you might want to give it a second look. For one, it's licensed from the comics, not the movies, so it's packed with a wider than usual cast of Spider-man villains and sidekicks, each of which can join Spidey as a co-op ally. (In the single-player game, you can switch player control freely between Spiderman and his partner du jour). Another reason is its pedigree—Next Level has proven with Mario Strikers that they can make family friendly games that are equally entertaining for adults. Let's hope their magic works on the Green Goblin as well as it does on Princess Peach.

| | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | Xbox 360, PS2, PSP, Wii, DS, PC |
| Developer | Next Level |
| Publisher | Activision |
| Available | Fall |

# E3 2007

## Editor Wrap-Up

We came, we saw, we wrote it down

## Dave Halverson

Editor-In-Chief

For how early we are into the next-gen cycle, the quality on display at this year's E3 was astounding. The 360 continues to deliver a steady stream of consecutively stronger new IPs, laying any sequelitus concerns I had to rest; the Wii was even lighter than I feared—No More Heroes was a no-show and precious few exclusives were on hand—but Mario stole my heart, and the PS3 never ceases to blow me away. Heavenly Sword was/is perfection, Ratchet & Clank Future is the next-gen platformer I've been dreaming about, Eye of Judgment is (I feel) one of the most important games in years, Little Big Planet makes me happier every time I see it, Uncharted is extraordinary and Killzone 2 will melt your brain. Surprises include Fractured, which just missed my list—not being all that bowled over by Halo 3, and a laundry list of mobile games lead by Contra 4. Handhelds are on fire. Overall disappointments were few: Banjo Kazooie 360 was a no-show; in fact, zipola from Rare. The new V Piñata game is coming from Krome Studios—and I'm shocked that No More Heroes, arguably the best game in development for the Wii, is still nowhere to be found.

### E32007 Top 5

**01. Ratchet and Clank Future: ToD**

**02. Super Mario Galaxy**

**03. Little Big Planet**

**04.Naruto: Rise of a Ninja**

**05. Little Big Planet**

"Ratchet & Clank Future is the next-gen platformer I've been dreaming about..."

## Brady Fiechter

Executive Editor

If there's one thing that sticks in my brain after processing far too many games spread across far too many hotels along the far-too-beautiful coastline of Santa Monica, it's that… well, there are far too many games coming out this year that seem good enough to evoke regret if I'm not able to play them all. It's starting to really sink in just how big the remainder of this year is going to be. The PlayStation 3 is finally unloading some powerful ammunition to show that the war is far from over, the Wii will finally host some sophisticated, traditional "real" games, and the Xbox 360 is loaded with a game that I want more than anything in a long time—BioShock. And I may not have the highest hopes, but I know a lot of you do, and Halo 3 is just around the corner to make a lot of noise.
When I step outside of my perfectly picky space and look at things objectively, it makes even more sense to consider this the most robust year gaming has seen. Never mind that there's a lot of complaining going on and a lot of risk-averse imaginations swirling in this business; there's still a heck of a lot of games that you can't help but get worked up about. This quieter E3 gave me more time to soak in more games and have more direct conversations with people who mattered, and I walk away anxious and wide-eyed for the future. Even an unlikely Little Big Planet hints that the industry is breaking free from some shackles and preparing for a new wave of possibilities.

### E32007 Top 5

**01. BioShock**

**02. Ratchet & Clank Future: Tools of Destruction**

**03. Folklore**

**04. Super Mario Galaxy**

**05. Little Big Planet**

"It's starting to really sink in just how big the remainder of this year is going to be."

# Greg Orlando

Senior Editor

This was the year we learned that yes, in fact, we could live beside the ocean, leave the fires behind, swim out past the breakers, and watch the world die. With apologies to the talented minstrels in Everclear, we made it through E3 with only the barest of scratches, the most wrecked of livers, and the sense that yes, we could see the forest for the trees, especially since the convention had hauled ass from the beleaguered wreck of a city that was Los Angeles.

This brand-new E3 showed us how to love again. Peter Molyneux's Fable 2 introduced us to the joys of one-button combat. With Rock Band, we got to be Keith Moon, banging the skins for a faux-Who. We got to race Sonic against Mario. We said, without irony, Hail to the Chimp as we visited the fine folk at GameCock.

There were a ton of great games at the show, and it almost seems like cheating to give the top game award to BioShock. On the other hand, whoa daddy... Even more games were shown via trailer, and although disqualified from being chosen here, nonetheless deserve mention: Resident Evil 5, Silent Hill 5, EchoChrome, Patapon, Metal Gear Solid IV...

## E32007 Top 5

**01. BioShock**

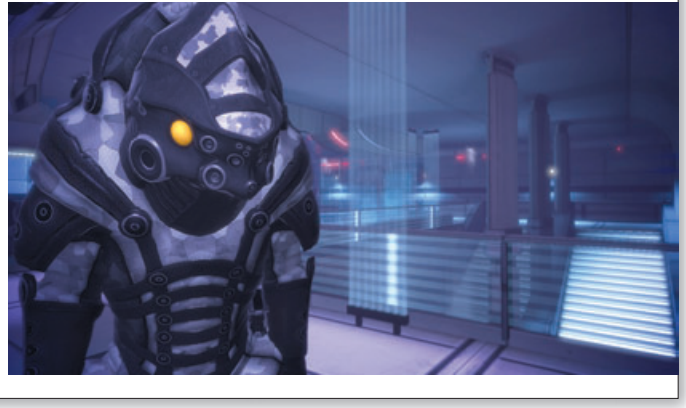
**02. Mass Effect**

**03. Little Big Planet**

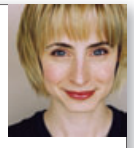
**04. Rock Band**

**05. Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare**

"...it almost seems like cheating to give the top game award to BioShock."



# Heather Campbell



Associate Editor

Maybe I'm in the minority, but I really miss the old E3. Game companies are just going to spend the same amount of money at other conventions (Comic-Con, a non-game trade show, included), so why not just bring the whole gang back together for next year? An E3 like this one is disenchanting and underwhelming, and when game magazines aren't excited about games, then the whole industry slumps a little bit. Not to mention that coverage in Santa Monica was often redundant—game days across the country had already shown off many of the flagship titles. Either have the balls to put the show back up the old way, or show a little courage of your convictions and cancel it all together.

Also, Stranglehold was the most fun I had all week. It may not be the best game of all time, or the most balanced, but any game that makes you cheer is worth your time.

## E32007 Top 5

**01. Stranglehold**

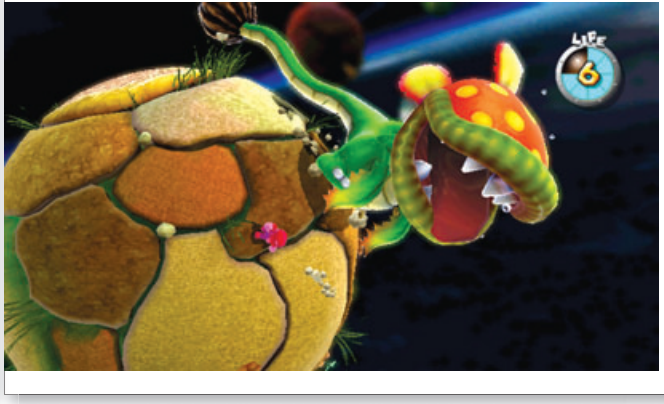
**02. Naruto: Rise of a Ninja**

**03. Super Mario Galaxy**

**04. Turok**

**05. WiiFit**

"...any game that makes you cheer is worth your time"



# Wild Arms 5

5 rides into town...

words Casey Loe

"...the environments and soundtrack of Wild Arms 5 have recaptured some of that Old West magic of the early installments."

In the next two months, PS2 owners will get one final wave of software before the platform completes it transition from industry leader to miserable dumping ground of film tie-ins and licensed Nickelodeon properties. Among the most promising final-wave titles is Wild Arms 5, which couples the popular Hex battle system from Wild Arms 4 with a new free-roaming overworld.

You play as Dean, a well-meaning dolt who has only ever left his small-town birthplace to hunt for ancient golem parts in the neighboring ruins. But when Dean makes the golem discovery of a lifetime, he finds himself entangled in a civil war being waged by the planet's nobility, and must find a way to stop it before it encompasses all of Filgaia. While the game's story plays out like a Xenogearsian sci-fi opera, we're pleased to see that the environments and soundtrack of Wild Arms 5 have recaptured some of that Old West magic of the early installments. In fact, the soundtrack is probably the series' best yet.

One of the big advancements in this installment is the vast stretches of explorable overworld that replace the simple 2D world map of Wild Arms 4. Another is full camera control in field and dungeon areas, which combines with Dean's ability to run, jump, slide, and shoot to make Wild Arms 5's feel more like an action-RPG than ever before. Unfortunately, these advancements are tarnished somewhat by constant interruptions from random enemy encounters. What's the point of having so much control of your character if you can't use it to avoid enemies?

Wild Arms is set to ship on August 28, alongside Soul Nomad, Growlanser VI, and .hack G.U.//Vol. 3 in a two-week JRPG flood. Make them last, PS2 hold-outs—it's nothing but Barbie Island Princess and Jackass: The Game after that.

## Wild Arms 5

preview

| | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | PlayStation 2 |
| Developer | Media Vision |
| Publisher | XSeed |
| Online/Multi | NA |
| Available | August 28 |

play
Staff "Round-up"


Eternal Sonata 072
Naruto: Uzumaki Chronicles 2 074
.hack//GU Vol. 3 075
Moto GP 2007 076
Stuntman Ignition 077


# Reviews

September 2007

**Dave Halverson**
Editor in Chief

**Favorite genres:** Platformers, adventure, 2D action, racing, RPGs, sandbox
**Now playing:** Heavenly Sword, Monster Madness, Moto GP 2007, Jeanne d'Arc
**Favorite Comic Books:** Battle Chasers, Lobo, Iron and the Maiden

Dave can't seem to let go of the past or get enough of the future, causing a strange genetic abnormality to take place. Immune to the burden of sleep or adulthood E Storm plays games new and old, both console and handheld by day, and fades away into any number of strange Japanese cartoons by night leaving only time to write it all down and ponder the true meaning of the universe.

**Brady Fiechter**
Executive Editor

**Favorite genres:** Adventure, first-person shooters, action, RPGs
**Now playing:** The Darkness, Pac-Man: CE, Blue Dragon
**Favorite Comic Books:** Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind, Crimson

Under constant pressure by a friend to flee the country and study the ways of the Thaoist, Brady continues to balk, proclaiming that his spiritual journey lies in movies and games. He finds joyful satisfaction in killing things, namely zombies and soldiers and evil creatures, which tend to pop up in some of his favorite genres.

**Greg Orlando**
Senior Editor

**Favorite genres:** RPGs, action, adventure, fighting, wrestling
**Now playing:** Dead Rising, Smash...Tennis
**Favorite Comic Books:** TMNT, Spawn

Of Greg Orlando, historians agree that he is, without question, the finest human being to be mentioned in this sentence. A veteran of the Cola Wars thrice decorated, Orlando understands the universe's great solitary truth: If the mule don't kick, you know the mule don't ride. He is currently missing, presumed pantsless...

**Mike Griffin**
PC Editor

**Favorite genres:** MMORPGs, first-person shooters, action-adventure
**Now playing:** Space Giraffe, Tabula Rasa KwonHo **Favorite Comic Books:** TMNT, The Amazing Spider-Man

Even as a wee lad playing Zaxxon on Coleco, the technology and artistry of game design has always fascinated Mike. He thinks some games are timeless in that respect, whether 2D, 3D, flat-shaded or bump mapped. Mike's goal is to equip the readers with accurate information, so that limited funds and time can be put to good use.

play magazine GAME of the MONTH

**Moto GP 2007**
p. 076

## The play rating system

10...Perfect
9...Extraordinary
8...Great
7...Good
6...Decent
5...Average
4...Below average
3...Poor
2...Bad
1...Terrible

**Nick Des Barres**
Japan Editor

**Favorite genres:** RPGs, Action, Fighting
**Now playing:** It's A Wonderful World, The Darkness, Galaxy Force II SEE
**Favorite Comic Books:** Nausicaa of the Valley of Wind, Watchman

Nick fondly remembers the first video game he ever played: Trojan, by Capcom, on the NES. He wishes he could claim even earlier gaming-roots, and the modern-day Nick would probably be affronted by the reference to "Trojan" and insist it be called "Tatakai No Banka (Elegy For Battle)", but the fact remains that he's been playing games daily for nearly twenty years and writing about them for twelve. He tends to gravitate towards the classic genres of his youth: RPGs, action/adventure, shooting.

**Casey Loe**
Contributing Editor

**Favorite genres:** RPGs, action, humming-bird simulators
**Now playing:** Dead Head Fred, Lair, Folklore
**Favorite Comic Books:** Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Shaolin Cowboy

Casey had a promising future as a video game journalist a decade ago, but booze, pills, and his all-consuming hatred of Final Fantasy VIII ultimately left him incomprehensible and unemployable. After spending eight years on the street ranting about Squall Leonhart to winos, schizophrenics, and syphilitic prostitutes, Casey has tricked an old friend into paying him to complain about video games in a national video game magazine.

**Eric Patterson**
Contributing Editor

**Favorite genres:** Survival Horror, puzzle, music + Bemani, 2D SNK fighters
**Now playing:** Pac-Man: CE, Bomberman Live **Favorite Comic Books:** Nausicaa, Azumanga Daioh

Eric's reason for over two decades of video gaming is simple: so far, real life has yet to provide him access to zombies, quiet resort towns overrun with demons, ghosts you can trap with a camera, or, you know, a flesh and blood Jill Valentine or Ashley Graham. Mind getting on that, real life?

**Heather Campbell**
Associate Editor

**Favorite genres:** Fighting, RPGs, Action, Etc.
**Now playing:** Eternal Sonata, Settlers of Catan **Favorite Comic Books:** TMNT, Dinosaurs: A Celebration #2

Heather's favorite game would be a hybrid of Street Fighter III and MMORPG level grinding. If someone would craft a title that was endless hours of fighting the same enemies, using classic Capcom button combos, then her death in front of the arcade cabinet would become the stuff of urban legend. Heathers been playing since Aztec Adventure, and still has nightmares about Missile Defence 3-D.

**Mike Hobbs**
Art Director

**Favorite genres:** Action, racing, adventure, alternative, shooters
**Now playing:** Pac-Man CE
**Favorite Comic Books:** Doraemon, Atomic Man

A gamer since Space Invaders, Michael has a soft spot for 2D shooters and other games that directly engage the player. Nintendo certainly ranks high on his list of ideal developers. He's also recently become addicted to RC sailplane flying, so you'll actually find him outside now, absorbing the sun's photons.

# Eternal Sonata

Make beautiful music together

**words** Heather Campbell

Eternal Sonata is a gorgeous game to look at. It justifies the purchase of an HDTV. The landscapes are breathtaking, the details on the characters' outfits are rendered in loving, lace-and-leather detail. But like a fine piece of jewelry that must be kept in a case, the beauty of tri-Crescendo's JRPG is constrained by problems of pace and design. Never has exploration felt so linear. It's almost as if guiding your character's onscreen adventurers is an illusion, and the game is on rails. Really wide rails. Add to this the ponderous, labored pace of the frequent cutscenes, and you have what is essentially an amazing visual novel that requires mythic patience to attend to.

I have been so hungry for a new, A+ JRPG, that Eternal Sonata has been on my radar for a year. In fact, it was one of the four reasons I bought a 360 (the others being Gears of War, Street Fighter Anniversary Collection Compatibility, and Settlers of Catan). I don't want to sound disappointed: Sonata does exactly what it promises, and serves up some surprises, as well. Perhaps it is because this generation of hardware has delivered so much innovation that I find myself frustrated, then. I want more from a "next-gen" JRPG, since so many of the genre's quirks are holdovers from a time when systems couldn't deliver realistic, layered and complicated combat. But Sonata is firmly, maddeningly anchored in its genus. For some, the result may be rich and satisfying. For others, the lack of growth may be stifling.

Happily, there are a few places where Sonata unmistakably shines. One is the story. Tri-Crescendo has gone beyond the standard sky-pirates and elves, and the result is unique and engaging. Fredric Chopin, the famous pianist and composer, is dying of tuberculosis. On his deathbed, he enters a fantastic other world that is on the edge of dictatorship. He meets and befriends fiery Allegretto, the magical

"Eternal Sonata has one of the few real surprises I've been hit with in a game for a long time."

"What I can't emphasize enough is the mind-breaking beauty of the game..."

Polka, and their young companion, the photographer Beat.

Whether or not this world is Chopin's dream—or another separate reality—is unknown. What our heroes do know is that only people who are terminally ill can cast magical spells. Seeking to cure young Polka, the group heads out to investigate a world-wide conspiracy that reaches all the way up to the heads of state.

Eternal Sonata has one of the few real surprises I've been hit with in a game for a long time. To write about it is to spoil it, unfortunately. I've agonized over whether to share, but the choice is so charming that it needs to be mentioned. Again, this isn't a plot point, but you've been warned. Every few hours into the game, the designers cut to a real-world history lesson about Chopin. Accompanied by Stanislav Bunin's beautiful piano work, pertinent European locations are shown in photograph and the screen is subtitled with music history. Cutting to actual photographs during an anime-styled JRPG is new to me, and the effect is jarring. Simply put, it reconnects the ridiculous events of the game to the real world, and reaffirms the idea that the baton-wielding, Japanese (or English) speaking hero is Fredric Chopin. It's a simple choice, but so interesting that I'm surprised it hasn't been done before.

Combat is an engaging mix of action and turn-based attacking. Enemies appear on the map, and can be avoided. Once Allegretto runs into creatures, however, the screen flashes to a battle-field where each party member is individually controlled in a button-mashing fight-fest. Not quite standard RPG fare, but not rapid enough to be really considered "action," the battles of Eternal Sonata are interesting, yet lack the courage to be considered truly innovative. Still, smacking an enemy around on the fly is a little less tedious than menu-based combat.

Additionally, battles are enriched by the light-and-dark system. Basically it means: fight dark creatures in the light and they're weaker. As the player controls the character's placement on the battlefield, driving monsters into the light (or baiting them out of the darkness) adds a small degree of tactics to the fighting.

The best part of Eternal Sonata's combat may be the offline co-operative play. With three adventurers in the party, players can battle side-by-side with three controllers. The freedom is revoked when a player heads out into the world again, but the battle-field company is a sweet bonus. Just don't expect your friends to be too happy with the lengthy sections in-between fights where they're not doing anything.

Eternal Sonata is the JRPG that the 360 needs, and the story saves it from being cliché, but gamers shouldn't be expecting a reinvention of the genre. It's classic, but that is exactly what makes it feel a little hollow. What I can't emphasize enough is the mind-breaking beauty of the game. Each character is animated with detail and personality, and each landscape—though largely un-explorable—is grand and unique. Eternal Sonata is a game you throw in to show off your 360; it's almost hard to believe that the cut-scenes aren't pulled from a hand-drawn anime. It's really, really magnificent.

**Eternal Sonata** score **9.0**

| | |
|---|---|
| + | Original Story, Multiplayer Battles, AMAZING Scenery, bilingual dubbing |
| – | Lengthy (but skipable) cut-scenes, limited exploration |

| | |
|---|---|
| **System(s)** | 360 (PS3 Eventual Release) |
| **Developer** | tri-Crescendo |
| **Publisher** | Bandai-Namco |
| **Online/Multi** | NA |
| **ESRB Rating** | T |
| **Available** | September 2007 |

# Naruto Uzumaki Chronicles 2

I know it's a little gauche to compare games, but it's very hard for me to get excited about Uzumaki Chronicles after playing Ubisoft's Rise of a Ninja. Whereas Rise of a Ninja is the Naruto story proper, Uzumaki Chronicles is a new, original tale for the PS2. Now, Naruto fans know these side-stories as "filler," and they're generally known for their watered-down drama. After all, you can't kill off any major characters in a filler piece; the main arc wouldn't make sense when you returned. However, instead of getting down on the title, I'll think of it as a pacifier. This is the Naruto game I'll play until the 360 one is published, I guess.

Uzumaki Chronicles is an action RPG with a leveling system similar to Kingdom Hearts. Players take control of a party of heroes from the Naruto world, and switch between their active members on the fly. Only one protagonist receives experience points at a time, so players will either be forced to choose their favorite, or grind through random encounters to empower their characters. When enemies are defeated, they explode into blue and yellow spheres … and players have mere moments to collect the circles to receive their hard-earned exp. Happily, this is a two-player adventure, so it's easier to level faster if you have a friend in tow.

Unlike Uzumaki Chronicles 1, the new game is not mission based. Instead, it's a little more linear, and tells the story of the Shirogane Clan—a mean-spirited race of puppet-ninjas. Using their puppet walkers, the clan is on the hunt for powerful orbs that can bring an ancient mechanical monster back to life. The Hidden Village of the Green Leaf must team up with heroes from The Hidden Village of the Sand in order to stop the villains from achieving their goals. Again, the problem with a filler story is that there's very little jeopardy. We know that no one's going to get seriously hurt in UC2, and watering down the tension kills so much of what makes Naruto great. In a game about ninjas, it's unsatisfying when nothing's really at stake.

Now, with sharpened graphics, more features, and an original story, Uzumaki Chronicles is fine for fans of the series. But the battles are a little stiff, and the relationships between locations, characters, and events would be confounding to Naruto newbies. Rise of a Ninja will be the game that crosses over. Until then, Naruto fans … eat your heart out.

> "Happily, this is a two-player adventure, so it's easier to level faster if you have a friend in tow."

| Naruto: Uzumaki Chronicles 2 | score 7.0 |
|---|---|
| + | Two Players makes Everything More Fun. |
| – | Game is stilted and has very little soul. Also, English Only. |

| | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | PlayStation 2 |
| Developer | cavia |
| Publisher | Bandai-Namco |
| Online/Multi | 2-player |
| Available | September 4, 2007 |
| ESRB Rating | Pending |

# .hack //

## G.U. Vol. 3: **Redemption**

Redemption is at hand

Finally, it all comes down to this. In less than a month, series faithful across America will be playing .hack//GU Vol.3: Redemption, the truly epic conclusion to the massive tale woven across an entire season of anime and three separate PlayStation 2 games. I find myself writing this every time I cover a .hack, but if you haven't yet played Vol.1 and 2, I heartily suggest you do so now. The series is truly great, and this final volume validates all that has come before.

With Vol.3, the GU series obviously reaches its climax...but for me, the three games have felt like nothing but a string of them. I can honestly say that .hack//GU is the most well-plotted RPG I've ever played, which is remarkable considering it has had to sustain its momentum over the course of three completely disparate games as well as any number of ancillary works. Imagine how difficult this must have been: .hack//GU is a massive multimedia project, spanning not only games but anime, manga and novels. For those who will only play the RPGs, every major mystery raised has to be solved within them, yet the spinoffs must also entertain in and of themselves, while simultaneously casting light on murky aspects of the main storyline. For the type of person who loves a rich and labyrinthine yarn, there's enough of GU to get positively drunk on...yet even playing the games alone delivers a powerful and complete narrative experience that is immensely satisfying.

> "The series is truly great, and this final volume validates all that has come before."

Yes, .hack//GU's strongest point is without a doubt its masterfully told story, and for those of you who only know the big-name, big-budget RPGs I shall tactfully neglect to mention by name, it may serve as a wake-up call. Role-playing games exist primarily to envelop one in a quality tale, and in that sense I cannot fault .hack in any way. In fact, I'm so fond of GU it almost pains me to bring up its flaws, all of which are gameplay-related, all of which are applicable to any one of the three games in the series.

Put simply, .hacks can at times be a chore to *play*, and Vol.3 is no exception. Series producer Hiroshi Matsuyama claims the tedium is entirely by design, to simulate the feeling of grindy MMORPGs, but whether or not this is true is irrelevant: It's unfortunate game design. Dungeons can be long and repetitive, overly large; the quests you're forced to go on are tedious; and although Vol.3 introduces a slew of new super-powers for protagonist Haseo, the battles are often monotonous.

In the final analysis, however, these flaws only knock a single point off of what is in my heart of hearts a perfect 10 series. I understand and acknowledge .hack//GU may not be for everyone, but I firmly believe anyone brought up on Japanese console RPGs owes it to themselves to play it. It's games like these and Persona 3—and not hyper-budgeted blockbusters like Final Fantasy—that give me hope for the future of the genre. If you've been on the fence about the series, perhaps waiting to find out whether the finale could possibly deliver on the promise of the previous two games, I can assure you: .hack//GU Vol.3, like the series as a whole, does not disappoint.

**.hack//G.U. Vol. 3 Redemption** — score **9.0**

| | |
|---|---|
| + | The immensely satisfying conclusion to one of the most beautifully-staged video game stories of all time |
| – | As with every game in the series, dungeons can feel like a chore, and padding is evident |

| | |
|---|---|
| **System(s)** | PlayStation 2 |
| **Developer** | CyberConnect2 |
| **Publisher** | Namco Bandai |
| **Online/Multi** | Virtual |
| **Available** | August 10 |
| **ESRB Rating** | T |

One cannot say enough about this character design.

# Moto GP 2007

Let's ride!

"If you're a race fan, break out the adult diapers."

**words** Dave Halverson

I've been reviewing the Moto GP Series since the first skid mark was laid (and hey, now they're real-time!) and as well as they've always stacked up in the grand scheme of two-wheeled racing, I've always been left wanting to some degree, until now. Visually, Climax has soared to near euphoric levels with 07. If you're a race fan, break out the adult diapers. Last year's tracks looked great aside from the odd missing detail, but these are so real you'll be checking yourself for road rash. Not only is the road incredibly normal mapped (and wait until you see it get wet), but the terrain at trackside looks and reacts like the real thing. Further delving into the pool of detail, we finally, after all these years, get real pits, mechanics, and even a team hotty to see us on our way. Nothing is missing; even the podiums look real. Aside from the graphics kick, the gameplay has seen some renovation of its own. Pre-race challenges help you fine-tune your racing line, and rider and bike customization reach a new high. You can tinker with your tank design and leathers until the cows come home, if you have cows. So get happy, get comfy and settle in for a rewarding career. This is a 100% in-the-zone racing experience. Once you find each track's rhythm (practice, practice!), it's the ultimate man-machine interface. There's no waiting for Extreme mode either. As you rack up wins, tracks unlock. You can jump right into an Extreme single race and take your pick of bike and rider. And are these courses ever pretty, not to mention fast. The new helicopter views help put it all in perspective: There's nothing like the bird's eye view of Andalucia Spain from a mile high, and of course the replays are sheer perfection. Although Climax has set yet another high water mark portraying the mightiest of two-wheeled sports, I'm sure they've still got a few tricks up their sleeves. Maybe next year they'll ship the game with a fan and the sweet smell of burning fuel.

**Moto GP 2007** — score 9.5

| | |
|---|---|
| + | Everything |
| – | Nothing |

| | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | Xbox 360 |
| Developer | Climax |
| Publisher | THQ |
| Online/Multi | 16 player online |
| Available | August 27 |
| ESRB Rating | E |

# STUNTMAN IGNITION

*The star of mass destruction*

**words** Brady Fiechter

**The first couple of runs through the chaotic Hollywood sets left me thinking to myself, This is the kind of loud, gimmicky game that needs to be put to rest. Oh great, I thought, you get to crash cars and get points! Oh great, you get to see replays of giant air and giant explosions! A Burnout wannabe with a beguiling but similar coat of paint this must be.**

**Then it clicked: I kept on wanting better results, closer calls, higher points. Unlocking new areas had to be accomplished. That part of my senses that enjoys the competition of gaming for the sheer thrill of the process kicked into overdrive. Stuntman: Ignition can be a lot of fun to get into.**

**It's hard to categorize, which is part of its success. It's not a racing game, yet you're driving an assortment of vehicles at high speeds along a linear line—in control but selectively taking out and hitting designated targets along the way to the finish, or more precisely, the end of a scene.**

**You're assuming the role of a stunt driver, who is working his way up the Hollywood food chain by impressing directors with your ability to create the most exciting scenes. Star ratings are handed out according to how skilled you are at sticking with what the director wants from a scene, which is anything from crashing head-on into traffic, holding a powerslide, sliding a motorcycle under a gap, landing on top of a moving truck—think of a possible vehicular movie stunt and it's probably here. The game picks up when you need to get into a rhythm and hold course as you link several maneuvers into a flawless run. Mess up more than five times and it's a reshoot.**

> "It's hard to categorize, which is part of its success."

**Stuntman: Ignition would benefit from a more style and substance, and its methods start to run a bit thin, but that doesn't keep it from hitting an acceptable summer-blockbuster-style mark.**

## Stuntman: Ignition

score **7.0**

| | |
|---|---|
| + | Lots of courses to plow through with a decent amount of variety |
| – | Overall presentation is kind of thin |

| | |
|---|---|
| **System(s)** | PlayStation 2, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360 |
| **Developer** | Paradigm |
| **Publisher** | THQ |
| **Online/Multi** | 1-8 players |
| **Available** | August |
| **ESRB Rating** | T |

# Dead Head Fred

Go a head; make his day

**words** Casey Loe

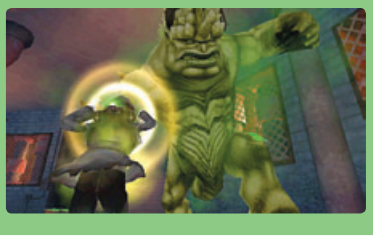
Dead Head Fred begins where a more conventional game might have ended: The body of a mafia investigator lies motionless, his mission failed, and his head taken as a trophy by the mob kingpin. Except the guy's still alive, and the brain in the jar atop his body really wants its old noggin back. To get revenge on the mob and rescue the mad scientist who can restore him to humanity, Fred can collect heads from his defeated foes and swap them at will, somehow retaining his ability to fight, reason, and make wisecracks with the ever-snarky voice of John C. McGinley (*Scrubs*' Dr. Cox).

Whenever he switches heads, Fred basically transforms into a whole new character, with new combat styles, combos and special moves, as well as unique abilities that can be used to solve the game's many puzzles. Zombie-head Fred can suck up liquids like water and gasoline and spew them out elsewhere, for example, while stone-head Fred can bash through walls and sink underwater without drowning. The game offers up a good mix of combat and puzzle solving, and ends up feeling like a bastard mix of a Double Dragon-style brawler, a last-gen survival horror like Haunting Ground, and an old Sierra adventure games like Space Quest. Even that belabored description doesn't account for its weird mobsters-meets-zombies-in-the-'40s motif and thoroughly filthy sense of humor, so I think it's safe to say that D3 has something legitimately original on their hands here.

> "Whenever he switches heads, Fred basically transforms into a whole new character."

Dead Head Fred offers several large areas to explore, each packed with puzzles that put the strange properties of Fred's heads to interesting use. You can even warp freely between the areas to solve old puzzles with new heads, which is a pleasant change from the usual linear nature of handheld puzzlers. Dead Head Fred isn't much for hand-holding, which can be a mixed blessing—the satisfactions of puzzle solving are so much sweeter when you figure out the solutions yourself, but it's easy to end up stuck in the wrong area when the head you need is far, far away, past a door you never even noticed.

The combat works pretty well once you get the hang of it—you basically have to soften up foes with combos and then dismember them with a special move, but getting used to the weird camera control and each head's unique fighting style requires quite a bit of trial and error. The game uses every button on the PSP (including all the directions on the D-pad as separate functions), so its learning curve is pretty steep. Unfortunately, that leaves only the PSP's imprecise and ache-inducing analog nub for movement, which sucks for the game's few platforming segments. But with its quirky mix of puzzles, combat, and blue humor, Dead Head Fred looks to be well worth the cramps.



It's Goonzilla!

## Dead Head Fred

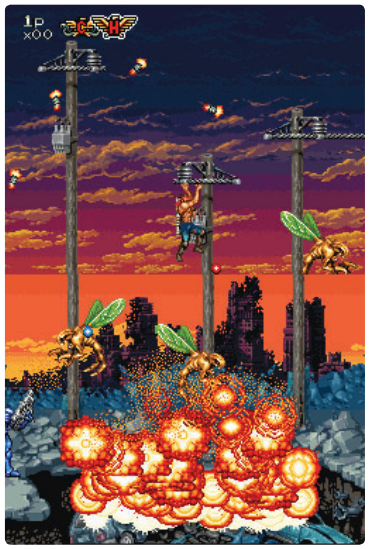
preview

| | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | PSP |
| Developer | Vicious Cycle |
| Publisher | D3 |
| Online/Multi | None |
| Available | August |

# Contra 4

The puny need not apply

**words** Brady Fiechter



Bill Rizer. Lance Bean. Spread shot. Machine gun. Flame thrower. Aliens. Run jump shoot. All this Contra goodness and not a lick of 3D. This is about as close as it gets to playing old-school Contra without actually playing old-school Contra.

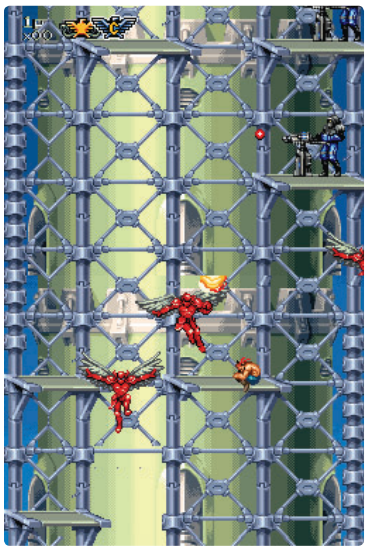
Contra 4 basically borrows design elements and musical themes from the first three games in the series, maintaining the absolute integrity of what defined Contra in the first place. It's easy to be skeptical given how many disappointing games have come and gone in the past several years, but with Contra 4, there's a pitch-perfect feel the moment you start.

And it's hard. The kind of hard that you'd expect from a true Contra battle; I had to laugh at myself when I felt like tossing the DS... Ah yes, the good old days. The beauty is, the game infects you with that itch to keep on trying again, gaining momentum a little more each time through.

Like so many of these wonderful 2D DS games, Contra 4 looks great, recalling the perfect simplicity of the earlier games in the series while decorating the scene with modern trim. If there was an urge to stray outside the lines and try something dramatically different, the choice to stay true and pure to Contra just seems such the right choice.

The two-screen presentation doesn't get too crazy, used mainly to provide more gameplay space and added scale. Enemies attack from multiple levels, and with the one big addition to the foundation—a simple grappling hook—you can zip up to a higher area at specific connection points. Gameplay is pretty much classic: horizontally dominated, with ubiquitous enemy fire and platforming obstacles to get in the way of your frazzled concentration.

Of course, two-player action is in order. If you are a true fan of this two-decade-old series, surely you have the memories of one of the first games to ever supply co-op shooting…



"All this Contra goodness and not a lick of 3D."

Just like mom used to make!

**Contra 4** preview

| | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | Nintendo DS |
| Developer | WayForward Technologies |
| Publisher | Konami |
| Online/Multi | 1-2 |
| Available | 2007 |

## Bleach: The Blade of Fate

preview

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **System(s)** | Nintendo DS | **Multi** | 4-player local or Wi-Fi |
| **Developer** | Treasure | **Available** | October |
| **Publisher** | Sega | **ESRB Rating** | TBA |

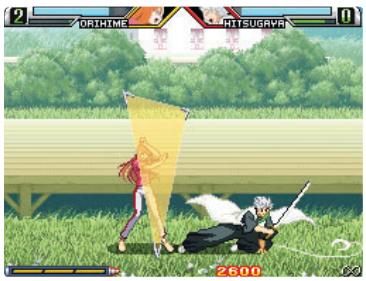
It's hard to blame Sega for not localizing Bleach sooner—after all, the series didn't even begin airing in the US till late last year, and many of the game's characters have yet to appear. But DS software has evolved a lot in the 18 months since Bleach's release, long enough for The Blade of Fate to be replaced by a sequel in its native land. Yet somehow, the long-awaited American version still manages to feel ahead of its time. This Treasure-developed 2D fighter has a great game at its core, and features like online multiplayer and wireless download play (so only one player needs to own the cart) are as rare today as they were back then.

Many of Bleach's 28 characters can be unlocked through the game's surprisingly substantial Story Mode, which roughly follows the Soul Society story arc that is currently airing on the Cartoon Network (so there will be spoilers if you beat it before the arc concludes in December). In addition to hidden characters, Story

Mode players can unlock a variety of Spirit Cards, which can be composed into decks and drawn on the DS's lower screen. You can tap those cards in the heat of battle to provide stat boosts and trigger special moves, adding another dimension to a game that's already rich in features.

It's been a long time coming, but Bleach: The Blade of Fate doesn't seem to be any worse for the journey. **Casey Loe**

"It's been a long time coming, but Bleach: The Blade of Fate doesn't seem to be any worse for the journey."




## Final Fantasy XII: Revenant Wings

preview

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **System(s)** | Nintendo DS | **Multi** | NA |
| **Developer** | Square/Think&Feel | **Available** | Q4 2007 |
| **Publisher** | Square Enix | **ESRB Rating** | NA |

With an editorial team in Tokyo, it's hard for us at Play to get too excited about E3 games that have already been released abroad. Last month's issue gave a full two-page spread to Revenant Wings, and staff ex-patriot Nick Des Barres has played through the game to its conclusion. What can I tell you that he hasn't?

FFXII:RW is a DS sequel to a PS2 game. Unlike the original, the game is a real-time-strategy piece. With Heroes of Mana (another RTS title) already out for the touch-screen portable, you'd think Square had fallen out of love with the classic RPGs that made them famous. Turns out, Square just knows how to play to the strengths of the DS; the system is made for this type of game.

Vaan and Penelo return in a light-hearted spin off story, with 3D backgrounds and flat, beautiful sprites. The two once-heroic, now-childish protagonists are set on becoming great sky pirates, so they head out to the floating continent of Lemures.

So that's what they were saying.

Soon they're sidetracked, thwarted from their goal by the introduction of Llyud, a beautiful winged boy who needs their help defeating other sky pirates who are plundering his homeland. **Heather Campbell**

## Front Mission DS

preview

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **System(s)** | Nintendo DS | **Multi** | NA |
| **Developer** | Square | **Available** | October 2007 |
| **Publisher** | Square Enix | **ESRB Rating** | RP |

Front Mission was originally published for the SNES in 1995. Combining mech combat and tactics gameplay, the Gundam-esque story about OCU soldier Roid Clive resonated with enough gamers that four sequels have come out in the last 12 years. Taking on armies of walking tanks in massively customizable war machines is an otaku dream. Add the emotional motivation of Roid's dead girlfriend, and you've got a military thriller with a heartbeat. But for American fans, there's never been an official release of the title that started it all. Until now, that is.

The DS is not just getting a re-release, however. Front Mission DS has the original OCU SNES missions, the special UCS PlayStation missions, and five new missions exclusive to the DS which can be accessed after chapter three. With the action split across two screens, more details of the turn-based RPG can be viewed and modified at once. Unfortunately, there's no Wifi multiplayer, but this is due to the game's sickeningly tweak-able Wanzers … a standard feature of Front Mission games that would have had to have been modified from the ground up to accommodate PvP. Fans of the series should be on the lookout for a surprise appearance by characters from Front Mission sequels, and new players will undoubtedly be excited about the Hi-Speed battles that make the game chug along faster. **Heather Campbell**

## Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles: Rings of Fates

preview

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **System(s)** | Nintendo DS | **Multi** | NA |
| **Developer** | Square Enix | **Available** | Q1 2008 |
| **Publisher** | Square Enix | **ESRB Rating** | RP |

Few gamers were able to enjoy the mirthful RPG action of Crystal Chronicles on the GameCube. It's probably due to the hardware involved. For four players to have an adventure together, you'd need a GameCube, four Link Cables, four GBAs, and at least two pizzas to bribe a friend into becoming the slow and combat-free chalice-bearer. With the DS prequel, you'll only need four DSs. The pizza will be optional; there's no Crystal Chalice in Ring of Fates.

Featuring a much richer single player mode than its predecessor, CC: DS is almost a revision of the ideas of the GameCube original. No lonely game here; when adventuring alone, the single-player hero is accompanied by three AI party members. Five character classes and four races return, but class/race bonuses are more prevalent in the DS game. And there's multiplayer wireless, but no online Wifi battling. Fearful of lag (and its effect on combat), the development team of Ring of Fates decided to focus on wireless to keep up the quality of gameplay. The best news may be that amazing composer Kumi Tanioka will be providing tunes for the DS game, and the Celtic melodies that such a privileged few enjoyed will now be available to a larger audience. **Heather Campbell**

Putting your back into it DS style.

## Castlevania: The Dracula X Chronicles

preview

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **System(s)** | PSP | **Multi** | NA |
| **Developer** | Konami | **Available** | Fall |
| **Publisher** | Konami | **ESRB Rating** | RP |

Let's recap: Rondo of Blood was the tenth installment in the Castlevania series, released exclusively on the PC engine in Japan in 1993. On this PSP collection, the game's been redone with polygons, preserving everything about the original other than its 2D sprites. And as for the original, it's also included, along with the sequel Symphony of the Night—one of the great games and almost unanimously considered the best in this long-running series.

It's now all packed together, with tertiary extras here and there and a few additions to the classic games themselves, called

Castlevania: The Dracula X Chronicles. I had a chance to play Dracula X Chronicles properly for the first time at E3, impressed by the 3D presentation's ability to retain the important qualities of the hand-drawn games, both in look and feel. There have been a couple great additions to the series on DS, but this game's more linear, simplistic Castlevania gameplay holds a nice change back to the roots. There are far too many fans who've never had the chance to enjoy Rondo of Blood; it's nice to see Konami agreed. **Brady Fiechter**

## God of War: Chains of Olympus

preview

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **System(s)** | PSP | **Multi** | NA |
| **Developer** | Ready at Dawn | **Available** | Fall |
| **Publisher** | SCEA | **ESRB Rating** | RP |

Without a doubt, the most impressive handheld game on display at this year's E3 was God of War: Chains of Olympus. Following their stunning rendition of Daxter, Ready at Dawn are hell bent on doing the same for God of War—delivering a PSP experience on par with, if not better than, its console counterpart. If anyone can pull it off it's RAD. Set in a time before the original God of War, Chains of Olympus follows Kratos through his 10 years of servitude to the gods of Olympus. Unbelievably, the game features the same level of dramatic camera angles as its console predecessors along with set pieces the likes that we've never seen on a portable machine. The gameplay on the other hand is anything but more of the same, featuring not only new combat moves, but deeper exploration and more puzzle solving to create a more adventurous overall experience. Can you say milestone?

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Development Update

# Huxley

Hybrid theory, combat tested

words Mike Griffin

"In many MMO games, story missions are often repetitively played over and over by players trying to obtain items or experience points, which we think reduces the fun of the game."

KJ Kang, Producer, Huxley

I have some good news and some bad news. The good news is that you're staring at a Huxley preview, and Producer KJ Kang, head of Huxley's development, has granted Play another exclusive audience and update. We talk weapons, classes, socket skills, co-op, squad gameplay, missions, vehicles and the parallels between the PC and Xbox 360 version. The bad news? Webzen's massively multiplayer FPS has been shifted to a 2008 release window. Considering how crowded the market is this fall, that's probably for the best…but it still hurts. So as we patiently wait for the heavens to fall and the mutation of our species to begin, we look to Producer Kang for some informative pain relief.

**Huxley** preview

| | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | PC, Xbox 360 |
| Developer | Webzen |
| Publisher | Webzen |
| Online/Multi | Persistent Online |
| Available | Q1 2008 |

# Interview

KJ Kang, Producer, Huxley

**play: At this stage of development your staff must be having a great time with Huxley, as most of the core content is complete and the game is highly playable. During the current phase, what has become the most difficult part of the game to balance?**
Producer Kang: Huxley has three character styles: Enforcer, Avenger, and Phantom, which are based on different gameplay styles. That made balancing issues much harder than in other FPS games. As Huxley is an FPS game at heart, adjusting the 1 vs. 1 battle balance is very important. Adjusting the balance in Squad combat with various combinations of character styles while having 1 vs. 1 combat balanced is the most challenging aspect of our work.

**What is your personal favorite weapon at the moment in Huxley, and what makes it so interesting to use?**
Personally, I find the Regulator the most attractive weapon. Often used by the Phantoms, it is designed for a specific purpose: it can damage any enemy shield, no matter how thick they are, while also acting as a healer to restore your friendly's shields. The Regulator is great for strategically attacking enemies with strong shields, like the Enforcer. Then it can be turned on a friendly to heal their shields when fired at them. The Regulator really shows off the value of co-operative play in Huxley.

**How about creatures? Do you have a favorite monster or enemy type in Huxley?**
Of all the monsters in Huxley, I particularly like the kind of humanoid monsters who are themselves humans, yet more friendly towards the vicious hybrids. Of all the enemy NPCs in Huxley, I like the humans who belong to the HLO (Hybrid Liberation Organization), a group which is also friendly towards the hybrids. They will attack the player strategically using their own AI communication and work co-operatively against the player.

**Are Huxley's character professions—the Avenger, Enforcer and Phantom—now considered finalized? Is it possible to develop a character into a subclass within each profession?**
Yep, the characterizations of the Avenger, Enforcer, and Phantom are finished, and we're in the stage of finalizing specialized professions of each character. For example, players can make choices about their character's growth as they progress in the game—so an Enforcer can be differentiated into the extremely defensive Enforcer or the Avenger-style Enforcer that focuses on attacking. These choices apply to the other character classes as well. Each character will be made into a very unique type of Avenger, Enforcer, or Phantom, depending on gamers' play style and progress.

**Can you give us a good example of high level armor socket skill? Are certain socket skills more useful for specific game modes or maps?**
In Huxley, armor sockets are skills and the use of these skills affects the entire gameplay. Using the right skill at the right time will be a key element in achieving victory. The Phantom has a decoy skill that generates a realistic decoy to lure the enemy to attack him while he's invisible, whereas the Avenger has an infrared vision skill that can be used to find an invisible Phantom. However, you won't be able to know exactly which skill the enemy is using. Also, players will find different skills more or less useful in different maps. For example, the infrared vision will be very useful in maps with lots of hiding places. Each game mode—Radar Domination, Team Death Match, PvP and PvE will each have effective skills. Huxley players will have fun setting their skills on their armor before entering each kind of battle.

> "We wanted to provide a dramatic sense of living in the Huxley world and to make sure that the players do not think of the game as merely a competitive sport."
>
> KJ Kang, Producer, Huxley

**We've known for some time now about the 100 vs. 100 battlefields and dozens of Unreal/Quake-like PvP maps, but players don't hear enough about the awesome co-op mission maps where a bunch of people can raid hordes of monsters together. How does a typical PvE battle roll out?**
Play Magazine, thanks for remembering the co-op PvE missions! We are currently play-testing the various numbers of players for the big PvE missions. In Huxley, a Squad is made up of four players, and a Platoon is made of 20 players—five Squads each. A good example for how this works is an intense map with a scenario-based mission where the objective is to break through large defensive lines built by hybrid monsters and players must co-op to succeed. Communication and coordination between the squad and platoon members is key.

**Let's say four friends want to enjoy some big maps together, stomping around like a band of mercenaries. Can Huxley players form private locked squads and move around to different maps, missions, join larger platoons, shop in town—while sticking together?**
It is possible to move through maps and missions with a locked Private Squad, which is something we love to see as it

This decked out Sapien goes to town on a row of mutants.

shows players enjoying co-op play. Also, it is possible to have your Squad join or leave big platoons while your Private Squad is still locked. In the city, you can look for your Squad mates or team up with other players before going into battle. This is also where clans and clan-based communication can be very helpful.

**Can players drive vehicles between the eight smaller cities that surround Huxley's two capitals? What kind of feel and physics should players expect in the various ground/air vehicles—something like UT 2004, or more like Battlefield?**
We haven't released details about the cities outside of the two massive capital cities, so I'm going to have to pass on that one. Sorry! However, there are plenty of cool futuristic armored vehicles that players can use to travel around between cities, and there also is public transportation. On the battlefield, players will find vehicles that they can use for attacking with user-friendly controls much like those in Unreal Tournament 2004.

**With all this wide-open engine power, you must have an enormous amount of flexibility when scripting the smaller, detailed story missions for the Sapiens and Alts…**
Through completing quests, players will follow an immersive story that will tell them why they're fighting in the war, and the Unreal Engine 3's powerful scripting functions made it possible for us to tell a much more in-depth story. Huxley isn't like any other FPS game, which often start with meaningless shooting. Gamers will naturally come in touch with many secrets that compose the world of Huxley by communicating with NPCs.

**Let's say a squad of close friends want to spend an afternoon fighting through story maps together. They decide they really like one particular map. What kind of gameplay options will the group have if they choose to play the same mission?**
Various story missions in Huxley are based on co-op play. The story itself is designed to be completed by several players in co-op gameplay. In many MMO games, story missions are often repetitively played over and over by players trying to obtain items or experience points, which we think reduces the fun of the game. For that reason, if the players in Huxley repeat a mission that they have already completed, Huxley will have new challenging goals for that mission, such as clearing a map without dying, or having a time limit on how quickly you must clear the map.

**We have advanced to a new generation of PC graphics technology. How does this affect development on the PC version compared to the Xbox 360 version?**
We certainly aim to provide the best visuals for users with high-spec PCs, but still provide a playable environment to PCs with relatively lower specs. As you know, the graphic technology in PCs is evolving every day. Xbox 360 has had fixed hardware specs since it launched, which means easier development from a tech standpoint.

**Are you pleased with the quality of Huxley's music and sound, and are you planning to release a separate soundtrack CD?**
Most hyper-action FPS games use electronic music to give a sporty feel to it. Even though Huxley is a hyper-action FPS game, we wanted to give a more affluent feel to its music. We wanted to provide a dramatic sense of living in the Huxley world and to make sure that the players do not think of the game as merely a competitive sport. I believe that we have accomplished that with the music created by composer Kevin Riepl. Kevin is acclaimed for his work on Gears of War, and has worked with us for two years. Because the music is so great, yes, we are considering the production of official soundtrack CDs here in Korea.

**Being a multi-platform magazine, it's likely that half our readers would play Huxley on Xbox 360, the other half on PC. We know the games will still feature some kind of cross-platform gameplay, but each version will offer a unique vision of Huxley's post-apocalyptic story and timeline. How do you make the cross-platform gameplay work from a story perspective?**
We are not talking in much detail about the story in the Xbox 360 version of Huxley, but we can confirm that we have some cross-platform gameplay. We can tell you that the Xbox 360 and PC versions have separate stories that take place in the same world. So for cross-platform gaming, players will encounter an epic in-game event that overcomes the time difference between the two stories and they will meet up and battle with players from the other platform. The result of the battle will visibly affect their own world after they return.

**It's going to be very interesting to see how console gamers fair against PC players, and how each version of Huxley will offer a unique, continuous storyline and presentation. Once again, thank you Producer Kang for taking the time to speak to Play.**
Anytime!

# The Music of Huxley

Scoring a brave new world

**words** Mike Griffin

Kevin Riepl is a relatively new face in the world of game composers, but millions of players have already heard his music in Unreal Tournament 2003, Unreal Championship 2, and most recently in Gears of War. The New York native, now stationed in LA, has parlayed his close relationship with Epic into another Unreal Engine 3-powered behemoth: Webzen's forthcoming mega shooter, Huxley. We spoke to Kevin about the execution and orchestration of Huxley's soundtrack.

"You serve the story well, you serve the game well, and ideally that serves the audience."

Kevin Riepl, Composer, Huxley

## Interview

Kevin Riepl, Huxley's Lead Composer

**play: Gears of War was a huge game for you. Now you're on Huxley, another Unreal Engine game, and UT 3 is next. After all this Unreal work, are you deep into the engine side of sound design?**
I'm actually just now really starting to understand how the audio gets implemented inside an interactive environment. It's really important, given all the advancements in gaming audio: slicing up the tracks for triggers and different parts of a level. With my work, the audio director gets to handle most of that stuff and I can spend more time being creative, writing larger pieces of music that encompass the feel of entire levels. This also makes it tremendously easier to record tracks with a live orchestra…

**How much of the Huxley soundtrack have you written?**
The whole thing: Levels, cinematics, cut-scenes…and I believe there's one last track to do, and that's for the intro movie.

**So you've had to score both the campaign style quest environments and the wide open, deathmatch-style battlefields. What was your approach?**
For the story missions, obviously I try to support the story, and we have dynamic triggers…but I'm more relaxed in the instrumentation. I try to let it be the background of the game, supporting the visuals and story. For the wide open battles, my approach was to create this multi-faceted battle track with different sections that we could loop in, but in different sections of the battle. You can take two musical approaches with those: go all out, try to support every action on the battlefield, or be more laid back and have the sound design and effects support the action, let the music come in at the most important moments. That's the way I like to do it. You serve the story well, you serve the game well, and ideally that serves the audience.

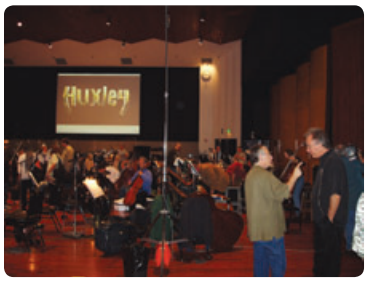
**There's a war for resources in Huxley and several factions duking it out. Did you write thematic tunes for the Sapien, Syn and Alt regions?**
Yeah, that's one of the big things I wanted to tackle: the different themes and influences of the factions. For some of the factions I went with more of an electronic sound, a heavy percussive edge, and for other factions I stayed more organic. But I didn't go into any extreme differences between them. Obviously the main influence in all the pieces is the live orchestra.

**This is the Hollywood Studio Symphony you're working with. Have you done any sessions here before?**
Actually, it was my first time working with the HSS; an 80-piece symphony. I believe we had around 25 tracks to do for Huxley. Surprisingly, we got it done over three 3-hour sessions, basically a day and half of recording. We managed to knock out 85% of the score on day one.

**Nice. Same orchestrator you worked with on Gears? Corey…**
Yeah, same guy—actually it's Tim Simonec (MI: 3, Chronicles of Riddick, Titan A.E.). That "Corey" name…[Laughs] I don't know if I'm allowed to say. It was used for union reasons; it's a pseudonym.

**An undercover conductor! Who knew? The PC and Xbox 360 version of Huxley have somewhat parted ways into distinct titles. Does this mean you'll need to produce more music for the console edition to support the different mission elements?**
Yeah, my impression is that the 360 version is going to need a different feel for the score. Not a completely different score, but a few different approaches. I'm thinking maybe half the PC music will be used, and half will be new for this version.

**So you still have some hard work ahead, but it sounds like you're enjoying this project. Thanks for the chat, Kevin.**
My pleasure.



# ask alienware

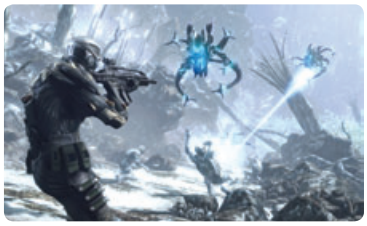
no. 014 // september 2007

In this edition we aim our reticules at DirectX 10 gaming, graphics card optimizations, the ongoing format wars, and the state of PC gaming this year.

**Q. If you want to have the full DirectX 10 experience in Crysis, and I mean everything looking and sounding great, what's a player going to need to set himself up for that monster? When games like Crysis come out, do they help to increase sales for Alienware because so many people upgrade to play it? Kevin, IL.**

**Alienware:** If you are looking to have the best visual experience without losing frame rate, you are going to want to purchase a system with the top-of-the-line components. The most important components to accomplish this will be your graphics cards (you will want dual graphics), the fastest processor possible and a minimum of 2GB DDR2 memory. With those kinds of components, you will see every blade of grass swaying in the breeze while taking down the nearest helicopter. High-performance users demand that their PC is able to squeeze every detail out of every pixel when playing revolutionary games. That is what Alienware does: provide the best performance for any demanding user.

**Q. What is it about Dx10 games that are so demanding? I recently played the Dx10 version of Lost Planet and it ran over 10 frames per second slower at the same settings I was using for the Dx9 version. Do you have any performance tips for DX10/Vista gaming that might not have applied to DX9 and XP? Thanks. Ben, CA.**



**Alienware:** DX10 games are so demanding because of the intense graphics being displayed on the monitor. You will never reach the same level of graphics detail with a DX9 graphics card as you will with a DX10 graphics card. Since there are significantly enhanced visuals, the DX10 graphics card is being taxed more heavily than any DX9 graphics card. To gain some performance, you can always tweak the graphics settings through the driver control panel for your graphics card. There are easy-to-use selection options that let you choose whether you want better performance (higher frame rates) or better quality (enhanced visuals).

**Q. Is there any reason why I shouldn't use the proprietary optimization features that Nvidia and ATI offer in their driver control panels? Optimizations for anisotropic filtering, anti-aliasing and multi-threading…is there a trade-off for using this stuff? Matt, NY.**

**Alienware:** The optimization features provided through the driver control panels work very well since they are built to work specifically with the graphics card you own. The only trade-offs you have to worry about are when you start changing the graphics settings with this control panel. For example, if you are using a mid-to-low-range graphics card, you may not be able to crank all of the settings to their max quality levels. For every higher setting, you are demanding more of your system, so you may experience video 'choppiness' or system 'lag'. If that happens, just lower the settings until the video/game is running smoothly. If that isn't something you are willing to compromise, then you'll need to upgrade your graphics card.

**Q. If Alienware had to hazard a guess, what new disc format is going to stick around for years to come: Blu-ray or HD-DVD? Or do you think they'll keep fighting each other until the whole world converts to on-demand/digital download, and traditional discs won't matter anymore? Graham, CA.**

**Alienware:** As with any technology battle, the final outcome for optical drive format supremacy will not be determined quickly. Each side has strong support from different content providers, so the battle will continue for a while. As you alluded to in your question, the wild card is online distribution. With the ever-increasing adoption of broadband connectivity throughout the world, on-demand content and digital downloads will continue to grow and compete with all forms of media distribution. No one knows who the eventual 'winner' will be, but what is definite is that consumers will benefit from all of this competition.

> **"…the final outcome for optical drive format supremacy will not be determined quickly…"**

**Q. Now that the platform wars have settled down and it looks like there's room for all three consoles and PC to co-exist together (for a few years anyway), what do you think the PC represents as a gaming machine in 2007? Gary, FL.**

**Alienware:** The PC as a gaming machine in 2007 represents the same thing it has represented over the last 10 years: the best platform for gaming. Why? The graphics capabilities for game developers will never be limited by a PC, whereas when a console is launched, the graphics are already outdated and the developers are forced to build a game based on a single specification. This limits the experience a user can have with a console.

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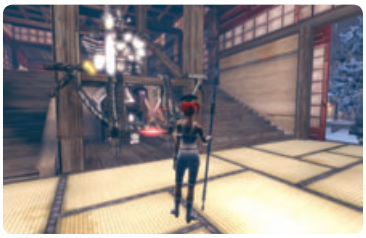
REAL COMPETITION

# Gamecock fearlessly exhibits Fury

In late July, Auran and Gamecock unleashed Fury upon the world as 200,000 players were given a chance to try the game during a 60-hour preview marathon. While Fury focuses largely on ranked player vs. player battles and fast, shooter-like speed and rules, the game's control and UI will be instantly familiar to MMORPG players. Characters can be raised through four schools and eight disciplines, using weapons like halberds and dual scimitars in concert with bursts of ancient magic. The preview game performed well, boasting some of the prettiest characters and environments in the genre, and most players seemed pleasantly surprised by the relentless pace of Fury's combat.



# A pair of aces for NHN and ijji

With the resurgence of casual gaming, more and more online developers are attempting to combine traditionally console-only genres with the robust online capabilities of the broadband PC. NHN's popular ijji.com gaming portal is launching two such titles: KwonHo, a competitive 3D fighter, and Drift City, a colorful Asian blend of MMO racing and GTA-like city sandbox.

Though KwonHo can't touch the opulence of top console fighters, its visuals are perfectly serviceable. Like a MMO title, you begin KwonHo by creating a character, choosing a name and tweaking the appearance of your fighter. You then select a fighting style and start training. KwonHo has a huge selection of moves for its five martial arts styles and as you level up your fighter you can buy new moves, apply points to strengthen existing combos, and buy clothing to make your fighter stand out online. You can even join a Gym (think Guild) and take on other teams. Be sure to re-map KwonHo's commands to a good controller via the options; much better than tapping-out dozens of Tekken-style combos on a keyboard!

The cell-shaded vehicles, happy characters and soft colors of Drift City may hint at a casual racer, but that doesn't do the game justice. There's plenty of mischief across Mitrion Island. Besides the addictive core of missions and collectible vehicles, there's a deep customization system that lets you change car colors, glow effects, spoilers, rims, stickers and body kits. You can even change the color of your nitro boost. To help build your race team, Operator Erina will offer you delivery missions, chase missions and battlezone races in one-on-one and team flavors. There's even a built-in MP3 player, so you can blast your own tunes while drifting around Mitrion's 3D streets.

Nick Des Barres

Dai Kohama

# GUILTY GEAR 2 OVERTURE

Guilty Gear grows up

**words** Nick Des Barres

**Western Media Exclusive Preview**

Guilty Gear and I go way, way back. I was so enamored with Arc System Works' original Guilty Gear on PlayStation that I essentially bombarded Atlus with layout and translation samples until they let me design the American packaging and translate the game for them. I own every iteration of the series ever released–yeah, even the WonderSwan games. I have every single soundtrack CD (legitimately purchased, of course) ripped to my iPod. I collect Guilty Gear trinkets. I have a tattoo of Bridget on my inner thigh. It's safe to say I'm a fan.

And so, it gives me great to pleasure to present the first preview anywhere of

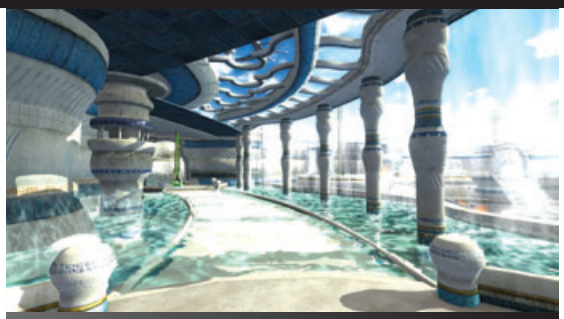
"Make no mistake: Guilty Gear 2 is a fighting game, but not like one you've ever played. "

© ARC SYSTEM WORKS

Guilty Gear 2: Overture for Xbox 360, the first direct sequel the series has had since its inception nine years ago. No, it's not a 2-D fighting game, but nor is it a Dynasty Warriors-style slashfest, as it may appear to be upon first glance. With Guilty Gear 2, Daisuke Ishiwatari, series creator, director, producer, character designer, lead artist, composer, and voice actor for protagonist Sol Badguy (!), is aiming for nothing less than the redefinition the one-on-one competetive fighting game.

Make no mistake: Guilty Gear 2 *is* a fighting game, but not like one you've ever played. Arc System Works describes it as a fusion between traditional one-on-one fighting games and RTSes, and it's designed from the ground up for Xbox Live! play–a completely new genre of versus competetive gaming dubbed "Meirei Action", a pun on the French word "Mêlée" and the Japanese "Meirei", or "order"/"command". Players will take control of one central character, the Master (three have so far been revealed; see the following pages for more), who in turn commands an army of Servants, non-playable characters to whom you'll issue commands while simultaneously battling in a more traditional fighting game style with your central character, though the stages are massive, multi-tiered, and Bushido Blade-esque in their sheer size.

The Guilty Gear series has long been known for its fantastically elaborate backstory, and Guilty Gear 2 finally seems set to do justice to the epic scope suggested, but never quite attained, by the 2-D fighting games. Arc System Works is still remaining extremely tight-lipped about 2's story, but we do know GG2 is set several years after Guilty Gear X, with Ky Kiske having ascended to the throne of Icuria as its King, while Sol Badguy still works as a bounty hunter, chasing down connections to his past. A lengthy, fully-



### STAGES

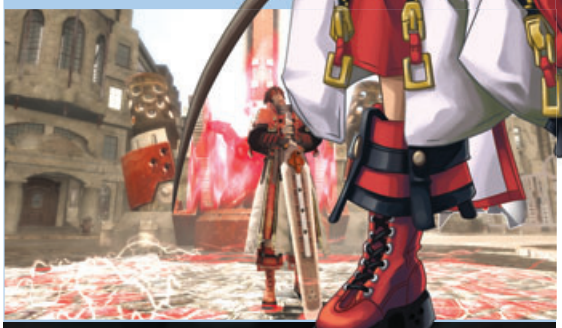
Only a handful of stages have been shown so far, but they appear rather impressive indeed. The Guilty Gear series has always had a sense of epic sweep and grandiosity, perhaps akin to the Soulcalibur series, and the gigantic, multi-tiered stages of Guilty Gear 2 would appear to finally match the series' narrative ambitions.

### GAMEPLAY

Arc System Works hasn't yet released concrete gameplay details, preferring to let the first batch of shots speak for themselves. What we can determine, however, is that although Guilty Gear 2 remains a one-on-one fighting game, the massive size of the stages now allows for numerous "Servants" purchased from a sub-menu with "mana" to be placed around the map and issued commands with the left and right triggers.

# Sol Badguy

Series protagonist Sol Badguy, the titular Guilty Gear, returns with completely new duds, and, most intriguingly, a new weapon. In the released screens he complains of a disturbance he can feel as a Gear, or man-made magical weapon, perhaps hinting at the direction of the story for Guilty Gear 2.



# Sin

The first all-new character revealed for Guilty Gear 2, Sin is a mysterious youth following Sol (whom he calls "old man", with paternal connotations) for unknown reasons. The Guilty Gear series is known for its outlandish weapons, but Sin's massive denim flag may indeed take the cake.

# Ky Kiske

Like his rival Sol, Ky has received a radical redesign, appearing older and wiser. He now wields a new weapon, a giant broadsword inscribed with the word "AQUILA", and according to screen shots, is now the King of a country previously unknown in the Guilty Gear world, Icuria.

"It's probably safe to say Guilty Gear 2's complete transformation is one of the boldest steps a direct video game sequel has ever taken."

voiced story mode for each character is promised, and Daisuke Ishiwatari has even hinted we finally discover the indentity of "*that man*", shadowy über-antagonist of the series. It's obvious from Ishiwatari's character artwork that neither Sol or Ky wield their trademark Fireseal or Thunderseal weapons (what happened to them?), and in the first released screens Sol complains about a strange rustling in his head and a "phase change", suggesting unknown Gears are involved.

Guilty Gear 2 is still obviously early in development, without even a target release date (or US publisher)...but I'm excited. It's probably safe to say its complete transformation is one of the boldest steps a direct video game sequel has ever taken, doubly so for a fighting game series. I've long felt that if one-on-one fighting games are to survive in the internet age, they're going to need a giant overhaul: Perhaps Guilty Gear 2 will be the prototype. We'll keep following this one closely, so watch this space for more, including an exclusive interview with creator Daisuke Ishiwatari soon.

## Guilty Gear 2: Overture

preview

| | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | Xbox 360 |
| Developer | Arc System Works |
| Publisher | Arc System Works (Japan) |
| Available | TBA Japan, TBA US |

# Doki Doki Majo Shinpan!

Perhaps not what Nintendo had in mind when they taught us that "touching is good".

**words** Nick Des Barres

I'm going to assume most people reading this have at least heard of SNK Playmore's Doki Doki Majo Shinpan! (loosely translated, "Heart-Pounding Divine Witch Judgement!"), the first Nintendo DS title to use touch-sensitive control for sending pubescent girls into fits of emotional turmoil.

I could put that in any number of less delicate ways, but this is a family magazine. In DokiMajo, feeling up, staring at, and blowing on schoolgirls with the stylus and mic is the name of the game. Why? Because it gets them het up. You see, when the young ladies get excited, marks appear on their bodies that reveal them as witches, and this is exactly what you as protagonist Akuji are mandated to do: Weed out the nefarious sorceresses who have infiltrated Seirei Takagami Junior High.

The game begins with surly teen Akuji being summoned to heaven and commanded by an Archangel to root out the witches. To keep Akuji in line, the Archangel sends along with him the uncomfortably Lolita-esque apprentice angel Lulu, who it goes without saying provides lots of racy glimpses at her knickers. The resulting gameplay would probably best be described as Phoenix Wright with the courtroom scenes swapped out for borderline molestation sequences. As Akuji, you proceed to investigate characters ranging from the ditzy cheergirl, to the school nurse, to my personal favorite, retro game otaku Renge. Young Renge-chan has a thing for old SNK games–her prized possesion is a mint copy of Athena for the Famicom, and she even carries around her beloved Neo•Geo Pocket everywhere–but even *she* might be a diabolical, closeted witch and must be shown no mercy.

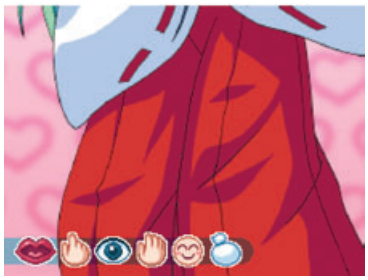
Once you've gathered enough evidence and hearsay to have a lock on a potential witch, you'll engage her in a magical first-person battle controlled with the stylus. Joining you for these fights will be your companion Lulu, or even witches you've previously outed. Should you win, the real attraction begins: Witch Check Mode.

Ah, Witch Check Mode. It is here you fiddle with, leer at and blow on the girls of DokiMajo, selecting appropriate icons at the bottom of the screen. Each girl requires a different type of attention to get her to reveal herself as a witch. You can tap them. You can stroke them. You can grab them. Yes...you can even make their breasts bounce. All in a hard day's work for a young witch detective, and upon completing these sequences you'll move on to the next scenario starring a different girl.

This might all be a bit awkward if DokiMajo didn't have its proverbial tongue thrust firmly in cheek. It knows full well how absurd its premise is–the official website asks you "Are you a bad person?", to which you must say yes to enter, and the manual coyly suggests you not play the Witch Check Mode around other people because "you probably don't want that Game Over to extend into real life". In all honesty, it's pretty tame, much more so than even classic sex romp anime like Urusei Yatsura, a genre from which it borrows heavily. I'll go out on a limb and say Doki Doki Majo Shinpan! will *not* be coming out in America, so if you want to put that stylus to use in a way your Brain Age-loving grandmother might not even be able to comprehend, it's gotta be the import.

"The gameplay would probably best be described as Phoenix Wright with the courtroom scenes swapped out for borderline molestation sequences."

Yes, this is exactly what you think.



**Doki Doki Majo Shinpan!** score **7.5**

| | |
|---|---|
| + | Amusing self-aware concept, solid presentation, great music... and... well... you know. |
| – | Not a great breadth of gameplay, story isn't strong enough to support its length |

| | |
|---|---|
| **System(s)** | Nintendo DS |
| **Developer** | SNK Playmore |
| **Publisher** | SNK Playmore |
| **Online/Multi** | NA |
| **Available** | Now Japan, Unannounced US |

# Persona 3 FES

The fabulous Persona 3 receives a Japan-only expansion

**words** Dai Kohama

If you're an Atlus fan, you've probably heard about Persona 3 FES, the expansion (and direct sequel) to the truly brilliant Persona 3. Regrettably, Atlus USA simply did not have enough time to localize FES, and unless Persona 3 does unusually well it may never be released in English. Unfortunate, but perhaps optimistic Persona fans can view the situation as an opportunity: You've always wanted to learn Japanese, right?

A word to the wise: If you haven't finished Persona 3 yet (and if not, jeez, get cracking), you might want to skip over the next paragraph. As FES directly follows P3's best ending, I'll necessarily have to spoil a bit of it.

Following the cathartic graduation sequence at the end of Persona 3, the world was largely at peace. It seemed to be a fitting, if bittersweet end to the story... but the ultimate conclusion was as yet in the future. On March 31st, a month after P3 comes to a close, the members of the Specialized Extracurricular Execution Squad gather for one final party, seeing each other off before their new post-graduation lives. They rest easy, knowing that there will be no more Dark Hours, there will be no more Shadows.

Or so they thought. When midnight strikes the night of the 31st, the Persona users of Gekkoukan High sense something amiss. The news on television and the clocks on their cell phones still claim the date is the 31st of March, not the 1st of April that logic dictates it should be...yet it will be some time before they discover exactly what this might portend.

Returning to her room, Aigis notices a strange butterfly that has apparently materialized in the school dormitory. Upon touching it, a deafening roar shatters the calm of the night, and Fuuka bursts in asking for help. Following her to the first-floor lounge, Aigis is startled to find a mysterious staircase leading down where none existed before. Standing beside it is a robot of what appears to be the same manufacture as Aigis herself. Introducing herself as Metis, she announces that she has come to protect Aigis...and eliminate

"Although the core game experience itself is rather different indeed, in terms of story there can be no denying FES is Persona 3, through and through."

the Persona users.
The back story ably sets up FES's gameplay, which you'll immediately discover is not simply more Persona 3. Although the game is marketed in Japan as an "appendix" to P3, it's essentially a sequel. The first and most obvious change is that you no longer control P3's hero, instead taking control of Aigis, who has full access to her built-in guns to attack with. This makes for a very different battle experience, as does the fact that there are no changes in skills due to the phases of the moon. In fact, they never change at all: As part of the story, the date is always locked at 3/31, Groundhog's Day-style. Perhaps because of this, you no longer tire while exploring Tartarus, and can theoretically dungeon-crawl indefinitely. Although the enemies are still Shadows, their properties and patterns have been significantly altered. Virtually every enemy now has the senses of a Rare Shadow from the original P3, and can detect you from a far greater distance. The battles proper have also been made much more difficult, primarily because you can no longer summon your Personas from the Persona Compendium. Fusing them was simple enough in the original if you could afford it, but in FES you'll have to rely entirely on Shuffle Time.
There are numerous other smaller gameplay alterations, but these are the most substantial. Although the core game experience itself is rather different indeed, in terms of story there can be no denying FES *is* Persona 3, through and through. Never does the narrative feel tacked-on, and indeed you'll come away with a better appreciation for the original ending by playing this expansion.
Persona 3–and by extension, FES–is a game that's very hard to complain about. If anything, I was a little disappointed by the emphasis FES places on dungeon crawling as opposed to the healthy balance the original featured, but when all is said and done this is more of a great thing. FES is available in Japan in two versions: An expansion-only disc that requires the original P3, and a complete version that features tweaks and additions to the main game as well. If we have any luck, Persona 3 will do well enough in America that Atlus USA feels motivated to release FES in some form...but just in case, you might want to start brushing up on those kanji.

## Expansion

score 8.0

| | |
|---|---|
| + | A smooth and well-handled continuation of a story that seemed to be finished |
| – | Don't just expect more P3. FES is a very different game |

## Complete version

score 10

| | |
|---|---|
| + | The brilliant "Episode Yourself" (original P3, though subtly enhanced) as well as FES: You simply cannot go wrong |
| – | Compared directly to the original quest, FES seems unnecessarily heavy on dungeon-crawling |

| | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | PlayStation 2 |
| Developer | Atlus |
| Publisher | Atlus |
| Online/Multi | 1 |
| Available | Now Japan, Unannounced US |

# Boku no Natsuyasumi 3

Because gaming doesn't always have to be about guns and tits

words Nick Des Barres

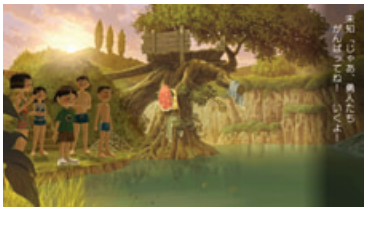
the wonderful PlayStation Network game flOw displays an admirable legend when you select it on your PLAYSTATION 3: *"Life could be simple"*. As I scrolled over its icon to boot up Boku no Natsuyasumi 3 ("My Summer Vacation 3") yesterday, I reflected on how the slogan could apply equally as well to this game, but for a very different reason.

flOw is about simplicity of game design; Natsuyasumi is about simplicity of subject matter. If you're not familiar with the long-running series, born on the original PlayStation, it is a rose-tinted simulation of the type of summer vacation Japanese boys experienced in the late Showa era (in this case, loosely mid-70s). I can only imagine what effect the game has on native Japanese (something like a headil-nostalgic version of their own childhoods, I would guess), but as an American coming from an entirely different background I am forced to appreciate it as a cultural artifact, perhaps akin to a *very* foreign film.

This is something truly fascinating and rare in games. Certainly, there are titles like Shenmue or Yakuza that offer a window onto synthesized foreign culture, but these are fantasies, entertainments. In Natsuyasumi, you milk cows; jump rope; collect beetles; do homework; compose haiku. There is no goal in the game other than to enjoy each and every day of your summer vacation at your uncle and aunt's farm in Hokkaido to the fullest–you choose how to spend your leisure time, and when the summer is over, the game ends. There is no way to "lose".

Does it sound boring? It isn't. In fact, it's incredibly refreshing: A casual game with actual gameplay and narrative, and a stunningly beautiful one at that. Many Japanese people I know who have enjoyed the series balked at this third iteration being a PLAYSTATION 3 exclusive. Nothing about it says next-gen, they argue. I disagree. The extraordinarily beautiful hand-painted backgrounds, provided by seminal anime background atelier Kusanagi, are an asbolute wonder in high-definition–being able to see individual brushstrokes affords a deep-seated emotional connection with the art that just isn't possible with the clinical lines of 3-D polygons.

"Does it sound boring? It isn't. In fact, it's incredibly refreshing: A casual game with actual gameplay and narrative, and a stunningly beautiful one at that."



This is a game that is never coming to America, but I think it's an important one. The industry is all a-twitter about the promise of casual "non-games". I say why not build a market for games like this, with undeniably "casual" subject matter, but inspired and informed by the grammar of gameplay established over the last 30 years of electronic entertainment? It's food for thought, and I'm thankful for Boku no Natsuyasumi 3 having entered my life to inspire it.

**Boku no Natsuyasumi 3** score **8.0**

| | |
|---|---|
| + | Beautiful fusion of 2- and 3-D, ambience second to none |
| – | The lack of clear-cut goals may frustrate some |

| | |
|---|---|
| System(s) | PLAYSTATION 3 |
| Developer | Millennium Kitchen |
| Publisher | Sony |
| Online/Multi | NA |
| Available | Now Japan, Unannounced US |

# Dragon Quest Swords

A very rusty Sword indeed

**words** Nick Des Barres

I'm steadily beginning to worry that motion control might not be for me. I've truly enjoyed the Wiimote's pointing feature in several games, but if all its fancy accelerometers afford is the transmogrification of beloved series into asinine wagglefests, I'm going to have to ask the gaming gods to color me "not interested". I know it may sound harsh...but that's because I'm coming off of Dragon Quest Swords.

I recognize the game may be decent for what it is. I suspect people who aren't rabid Dragon Quest fans will enjoy it...but I can only tell you how it affected me, a Dragon Quest aficionado for twenty years. Quite frankly, it inspired sadness. Not so much because of its subject matter–what more obvious choice for a Wii game than a sword-swinging adventure–but because of its shoddy handling.

Swords is a nominal sequel to Kenshin ("Sword God") Dragon Quest, a 2003 plug-and-play game that offered Wii-style motion control three years before Nintendo. It was novel at the time, a $59 toy that didn't pretend to be anything but. Swords borrows the exact same structure–eight light gun shooting-style stages in which you march straight ahead, defeating waves of enemies as they appear– but haughtily gussies itself up as a real RPG, or so Square Enix would have us believe.

Unfortunately, no amount of lovely Akira Toriyama character designs (a terrible waste on this forgettable game; I feel they're some of his best in years), fancy voiceovers by name screen actors or quality texture work can mask the fact that this is, at most, a six-to-eight-hour-long arcade game. As brief as the game is, it even manages to be tedious: The stages are designed so that extensive memorization of patterns is required, especially so for bosses. You'll find yourself playing through each stage at least twice, and it only ends up feeling like a transparent attempt to artificially lengthen playtime.

This shouldn't suggest the frenetic bouts of swordplay aren't fun. They are... but as a gimmick to hang your entire game on, especially one called *Dragon Quest*, they wear awfully thin. Later stages require slashes at very specific angles, which due to the inherent imprecision of the Wiimote (or perhaps simply unfortunate programming) are far too difficult to execute. Much of the time you want a straight horizontal slash, you'll get a diagonal one, and vice-versa. The central town hub is similarly an awful chore to navigate, with totally unnecessary 3-D movement (the rest of the game is stalwartly on one axis), requiring an unnatural grip on the Wiimote.

> "Unfortunately, no amount of lovely Akira Toriyama character designs, fancy voiceovers by name screen actors or quality texture work can mask the fact that this is, at most, a six-to-eight-hour-long arcade game. "

I wish I could find nicer things to say about Dragon Quest Swords. I can't even praise its decent graphics in good faith, because frankly the two-and-a-half-year-old DQVIII on PlayStation 2 looks miles better, with vastly superior animation in particular. Perhaps the best thing about Swords is its music, which for the first time in the history of the series isn't composed by the now 76-year-old Koichi Sugiyama. Instead, Manami Matsumae of early Mega Man series fame has taken over the reins, and she does a highly accurate and laudable Sugiyama impression indeed. An all-around disappointment to be sure, but there are still many months left until Dragon Quest Swords gets its eventual US release. At this point, I can but hope Square Enix sees fit to polish up the foreign release version.

| Dragon Quest Swords | score 6.5 |
|---|---|
| + | Quality character design, decent environments, excellent music |
| – | Ridiculously short and repetitive, flimsy story, poor motion detection |
| **System(s)** | Wii |
| **Developer** | Eighting/Raizing/Genius Sonority |
| **Publisher** | Square Enix |
| **Online/Multi** | 1 |
| **Available** | Now Japan, 2008 US |

# BLACK LAGOON VOLUME 2

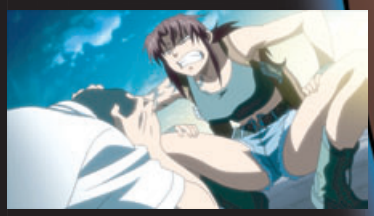
Back in Black

**words** Dave Halverson

It isn't often that a second volume lives up to its predecessor, especially when its predecessor is as exceptional as *Black Lagoon*'s maiden voyage, but such is the case with Volume 2 of what seems destined to becoming one of 2007's very best new series. The first volume established Rock's entry into the ranks of The Lagoon Company—a for-hire mercenary team lead by the cool-headed Dutch, along with Revy—a smoking-hot but stone-crazy über babe, and their resident techie, Benny. All they were lacking was a businessman; enter wimpy errand boy Rock, left for dead by his big-city employer after a covert delivery.

Volume 2 spends much of its time sorting out the relationship between Revy and Rock. He possesses morals and conviction, traits that don't sit so well with Revy who believes in two things—money and killing, in that order. All of this lovely drama is sandwiched within four extremely well-paced episodes, including a nice bit of business with a neo-Nazi group you just can't wait to see get their comeuppance—and Revy throws in extra sauce—and a couple of church ladies that like to get paid more than pray. Once again the animation is locked and loaded, the dub exceptional, and the overall production gets two big swollen thumbs up. I'm lovin' me some *Black Lagoon*.

"...destined to becoming one of 2007's very best new series."



**Black Lagoon** — score 9.0

| | |
|---|---|
| + | Great character development and storylines; superb dub, excellent character design |
| – | Aside from a few cliché Nazis it's all good. |

| | |
|---|---|
| **Released By** | Geneon Entertainment |
| **Volume** | 2 |
| **Running Time** | 100 minutes |
| **Episodes** | 5-8 |
| **Rating** | 16 and up |
| **Available** | Now |

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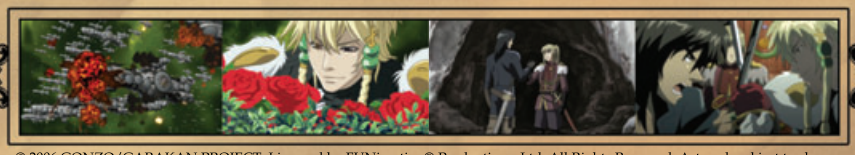

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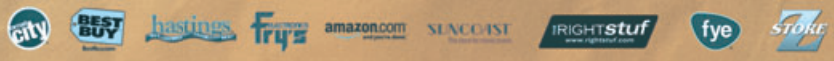

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# 鴉 KARAS

…It is time: sway to and fro…sway

**words** Dave Halverson

the first volume of *Karas*, as hard to follow as it may be (I suggest multiple viewings), established the state of the supernatural world's hold on the fate of humanity. Within a dimension parallel to our own, demons, or "Yokai," exist, and up until now have been able to go pretty much undetected. Any seepage into our world is dismissed as phenomenon or hoax, passed down to the two-man division of the Tokyo PD assigned to investigate bizarre occurrences. But things are heating up significantly in Tokyo proper. Although time is suspended while demons do battle, any structures or people caught in the crossfire risk obliteration and the body count and damage toll is rising…

The fight at the heart of *Karas* is over the fate of the world. If Tokyo falls, Japan falls, and then the world, so the stakes are high. The battle rages between the old Karas, Lord Eko, and the new Karas—an armored demon spawned from a human host, summoned by a "Yurine"—a spirit of the land created by the city itself. The old Karas that protected Tokyo for centuries has been tempted by the Shadow Path (can you say the dark side?) and has gone on a rampage to claim dominion over both human and demon.

"All you really need to know is that the visual that accompanies all this hocus pocus is superb..."

All that stands in his way—and he has friends—is the new Karas. As Volume 2 opens, the new Karas' Yurine (Yuri) has been ambushed, and without her he cannot transform. But Eko has a brother and he refuses to sit idly by and watch his sibling become a murderous fiend.

Sound complex? It actually is, although Volume 2 does shed a lot of light on the situation. All you really need to know is that the visual that accompanies all this hocus pocus is superb. The rendered elements are exceptional, the marriage between traditional animation and CGI unique to the series' dark veneer and the Karas battles themselves are among the best fight scenes you'll see anywhere.

**Karas** score X.x

| | |
|---|---|
| + | Absolutely gorgeous, similar to but better than most similar American superhero fare |
| – | Hard to follow; almost too complex |

| | |
|---|---|
| **Released By** | Manga Video |
| **Volume** | 2 |
| **Running Time** | 80 minutes |
| **Episodes** | NA |
| **Rating** | Unrated |
| **Available** | September 25 |

# TEKKONKINKREET

## Treasure Town of Lost Children

## 鉄コン筋クリート

**words** Heather Campbell

*Tekkonkinkreet* is a film about globalization, both in its narrative and by way of its construction. An anime directed by Michael Arias (an American whose previous work includes *The Animatrix*), written by Anthony Weintraub, and based on the serial manga by Taiyo Matsumoto, the film focuses on struggle between old and new—between nostalgia and commerce. Lyrical, playful, and imaginative, *Tekkonkinkreet* soars when it disentangles itself from linear expectations, and flounders only when it tries to deliver on an action plotline.

The story is about two street kids named Black and White who are the self-appointed guardians of Treasure Town. Their world is intricate and detailed, like a Japanese clockwork music-box. Every surface of Treasure Town has some texture, every environment crackles with lived-in energy. Like many fantasy films, *Tekkonkinkreet*'s environment is as much a character as its protagonists, and Treasure Town is well-realized and inviting. Though one may not want to live in the musky strip-joints that underline its streets, visiting Treasure Town is a sensory delight.

As a counterpoint to the backgrounds of Treasure Town, the character design of *Tekkonkinkreet* is unfamiliar and new. Perhaps as an effort to position the film as a global piece, rather than an Anime from Japan, Arias has populated the world with flat faces and tiny eyes. To an American familiar with popular Japanese animation, the movie might look European. Regardless, Black and White retain some specifically anime characteristics—like the unexplained ability to fly.

Black and White live in an old car, the dashboard cluttered with toy artifacts and memories. The kids' names are easy descriptions of their personalities: Black is violent, aggressive and cocky; White is dreamy, clumsy, and free. The two satisfy each other with ying-yang camaraderie, like George and Lenny in Of Mice and Men. They need each other to survive, to find balance in their impoverished world that teeters on the brink of change.

In-between the introductions of tertiary characters and tangential stories, the main line of *Tekkonkinkreet* takes shape. Snake, a developer who wants to transform Treasure Town's sprawl into an amusement park, employs three brutal, supernatural thugs to take out the only thing that stands in his way: the alley cats Black and White. Sure, Black is only a child, but his presence in Treasure Town is a roadblock to change. These kids aren't just the local gang; on a metaphorical level the children work as the remaining ideals of a nostalgic city.

More than most anime, Black and White come off like actual children. White is obsessed with hats, watches, and drawing. Black's most aggressive and violent moments are a still a little ungainly and awkward. Because of this uncanny capturing of youth, the fight sequences with the children are quite severe. Though Black wants to be a super-hero, he's only a kid, and it's difficult to watch the violence he peruses. Seeing a child break someone's nose with a pipe is very different from the cartoonish violence of *Live Free or Die Hard*.

The tapestry of stories that take place in *Tekkonkinkreet* remind me a little of Wong-Kar Wai's work. Amid the colorful backgrounds and sometimes manic edits, there's a very simple story here, told with an experimental flourish. Towards the end of the film, as Black and White remain separated, Arias and Weintraub illustrate the children's desperation through poetic sequences of non-linear animation. Black's state of mind is represented by a child-Minotaur, whose smoky voice seduces Black towards a state of total, unrepentant violence. White, now in the custody of the police, works on carefree drawings which soon become troubled. His anxiety overwhelms him, and finally crescendos in seizures and screaming fits. The two will be lost if they aren't reunited.

Though the setting is dark, the moral of *Tekkonkinkreet* is uplifting. Even with the world collapsing around them, Black and White retain their identities through friendship. The film seems to tell us that the old needs the new to survive but cautions against a blind approval of change. Treasure Town needs its history to progress, just as Black and White need each other to live.

**Tekkonkinkreet** score **9.0**

| | |
|---|---|
| + | Brutally and beautifully elegant. |
| – | May be too far off the beaten path for some. |

| | |
|---|---|
| **Directed by** | Michael Arias |
| **Written by** | Anthony Weintraub |
| **Released By** | Destination Films |
| **Running Time** | 111 minutes |
| **Rating** | R |
| **Available** | September |

"...the character design is unfamiliar and new."

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# THIN is in

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What a decade it's been! As if the iPod, iPhone, American Idol, and celebrity beaver shots weren't enough, those crazy anime companies have gone and developed revolutionary thin packs. These marvels of science and technology not only contain every tender morsel of a given series but take up less room in your messy DVD rack and cost a fraction of what the spoon-fed versions would set you back. What will they think of next!?

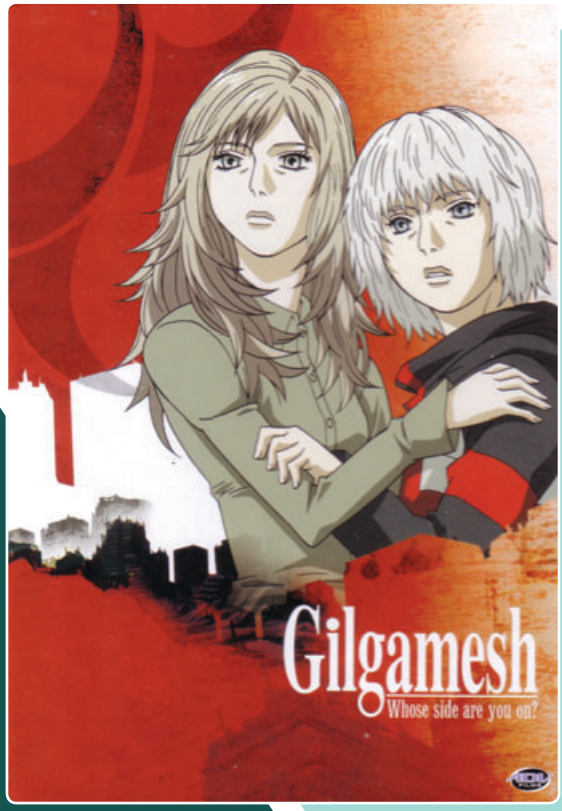
The latest and truly four of the greatest from ADV Films include that friskiest of giant robo soaps *Godannar*—loaded with jiggly bits and zany boy/girl robot action; *Madlax*—the female mercenary-meets-school-girl parallel nail biter; *Gravion*—short for egomaniacal zillionaire giant robo army commander surrounded by large-breasted females; and *Gilgamesh*. These are all fine series; in fact, aside from the fact that there's not a single Play quote on the lot of them (those bastards!), they're anime-tastic, but *Gilgamesh* is truly in a class by itself. Dark, gothic, and utterly captivating from start to finish, few anime boast its level of sophistication and character development. Buy all four, but out the Absinthe (for *Gilgamesh*) and make a weekend out of it!

**Godannar**
26 Episodes // 650 minutes // TV-MA

**Gravion**
25 Episodes // 625 minutes // TV-MA

**Gilgamesh**
26 Episodes // 650 minutes // TV-14

**MADLAX**
25 Episodes // 625 minutes // TV-14



# Disgaea: The Netherworld War

When earthlings attack!

Have you been waiting (and waiting and waiting) for Laharl, Etna and Flonne to finally reach the Overlord's castle? Well I have good news and bad news. They get there alright, but let's just say the red carpet remains rolled up in the foyer. Those annoying do-gooders from Earth finally prove useful to Laharl—unwittingly handing him the Demon Tome—but no sooner launch an attack on the Netherworld (turns out there are more of them… like two million) turning the story on its ear, which happens to be exactly what it needed at this juncture (the horse was almost dead). Elsewhere Flonne proves a useful diversion in Volume 3 (if you like it fruity, episode 11 is all you) but once again it's those wacky Prinnies (vassals to the vassals) that steal the show. Disgaea may not be for everyone (it hasn't exactly clicked with its PS2 audience), but if you're looking for a dose of cheeky video game-based demon humor, there's nothing better (okay, so, there's nothing period). The animation quality has had its share of ups and downs although it's still top notch for a video game-based TV series, and this is easily some of the best character design in the great anime kingdom. I like the dub too (strangely), especially Laharl and his infectious laugh. Now all we need is a next-gen version of the game to go with it! **Dave Halverson**

**Disgaea: The Netherworld War** — score **7.5**

| | |
|---|---|
| + | Still funny, and I can't get enough of the characters |
| – | It took 2 volumes for something big to happen |

| | |
|---|---|
| **Released By** | Geneon Entertainment |
| **Volume** | 3 |
| **Running Time** | 100 minutes |
| **Episodes** | 9-12 |
| **Rating** | 13 and up |
| **Available** | Now |

"...once again it's those wacky Prinnies that steal the show"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# MANGA MADNESS

## TOKYOPOP ESSENTIAL 20

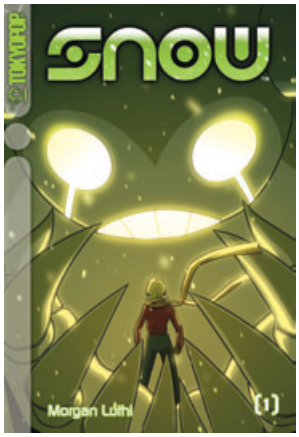
**Legend:**

Manga – Traditional right to left reading Japanese comics
Manwha –Korean manga
Mangaka – Japanese influenced US comics
Y/Youth
T/Teen
OT/Older Teen
M/Mature

...All things considered, it's all manga.

The manga isle at any major book store is an overwhelming space—a sea of tightly packed spines that to the uninitiated is daunting enough, let alone the squatters that usually line the floor. Nothing like having some kid's face in your butt while you struggle to peruse a sea of nondescript titles. I try to always have a fart ready to thin the herd. You've also probably noticed that the majority of titles come from TokyoPop, a veritable spout for manga, manwha, mangaka, and anything else they can squeeze into a pint-sized publication. Where Del Rey, VIZ, Broccoli, Anime Works, Dark Horse, Dr Master, and Seven Seas stick predominantly to the traditional right-to-left Japanese manga, TokyoPop endeavors to reshape the category by publishing a (very) wide variety of books for an ever-burgeoning demographic. In the interest of getting you in and out of the madness as quickly as possible, here's 20 TPop series that no literate person should be without.

## MANGAKA




### Snow

**Story & Art:** *Morgan Luthi* | **Rating:** *T 13+*
**Genre:** *Action/Sci-Fi* | **Volumes to date:** *1*

**The drift:** War Mongers—a product of grand design—are the most omnipotent force in the galaxy, able to lay waste to entire planets. Only one place is safe in all the cosmos: the planet Hub, which is where we find Snow, a young man with a scarred face and even more scarred past. When the Warmongers finally do appear on Hub, well, when it rains it Snows.
**Bottom line:** Luthi's illustrations leap off the page in this brisk ultra-fun Action/Sci-Fi epic. Original in every way…Plus, I think these may the most giant robos ever.

### A Midnight Opera

**Story & Art:** *Hans Steinbach*
**Rating:** *T 13+*
**Genre:** *Action/Horror*
**Volumes to date:** *7*

**The drift:** Thank you Hans "Hanzo" Steinbach wherever you are. As the undead struggle for their independence, two brothers stand at the brink of a holy revolution. Ground zero—the underground metal scene, present day, Paris. Ein Delalune, rocker extraordinaire has found solace and maybe even love in our world, but his brother Leroux will stop at nothing to turn it into a living crypt.
**Bottom line:** Wall-to-wall Goth, metal, witches, pious fanatics, and an undead war? All hail Hanzo.

### AfterLife

**Story:** *Stormorow Hayes*
**Art:** *Rob Steen*
**Rating:** *OT 16+*
**Genre:** *Horror*
**Volumes to date:** *2*

**The drift:** Afterlife presents a bleak ever-after for mankind where you come (and remain) as you are: Everyone had it wrong. But that's not good enough for Thaddeus, who has become obsessed with finding the true meaning of life and death.
**Bottom line:** Smart, original and presented with real-time decay!

### MBQ

**Story & Art:** *Felipe Smith*
**Rating:** *OT 16+*
**Genre:** *Action/Comedy*
**Volumes to date:** *2*

**The drift:** Felipe Smith's ode to the struggling artist is among the most expressive and distinctive manga ever created. Whether it's sex or violence he delivers his master stroke with such verve that the characters literally jump off the page. Someone get this man a movie or TV deal STAT.
**Bottom line:** OT manga on the ragged edge. Gangsta meets geek meets 10 gallons of Jolt cola!

### I Luv Halloween

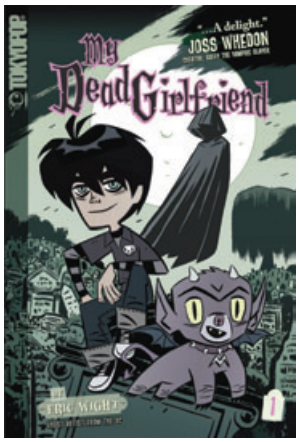
**Story:** *Keith Giffen* | **Art:** *Benjamin Roman*
**Genre:** *Comedy/Horror* | **Rating:** *OT 16+*
**Volumes to date:** *2*

**The drift:** There's only one word to describe ILH: Insanity. The most vile, disgusting and laugh-out-loud collection of words and pictures in your book store. Superb in every way conceivable ILH sucks you in, holds you tight and never lets go. If there's such thing as a manga hangover, this brings it on.
**Bottom line:** Trick or Treating will never be the same.

### The Dark Goodbye

**Story:** *Frank Marraffino* | **Art:** *Drew Rausch*
**Genre:** *Horror/Mystery* | **Rating:** *OT 16+*

**The drift:** In the vein of HP Lovecraft, the surreal noir world of The Dark Goodbye follows detective Max "Mutt" Mason down a rabbit hole of palpable horror and intrigue. What begins as a missing person's case quickly spirals into the discovery of an ancient evil planning to crash the world's party.
**Bottom line:** The noir setting is perfectly matched to Rausch's seeping hordes and clever dialogue, which speak volumes using few words: Heady stuff.




### My Dead Girlfriend

**Story & Art:** *Eric Wight* | **Rating:** *T 13+*
**Genre:** *Comedy/Fantasy* | **Volumes to date:** *1*

**The drift:** A misfit among a family of ghosts and a student body comprised of ghouls, Finney Bleak's mundane life finally takes a turn for the better when he finds true love. Too bad all good things must come to an end…or must they? Finding out couldn't be more enjoyable.
**Bottom line:** Eric Wight's vision of the living, living dead and everything in-between is simply sublime and the art within is perfectly suited.

## Battle Royale

**Story:** *Koushun Takami* | **Art:** *Masayuki Taguchi*
**Genre:** *Action* | **Rating:** *M 18+* | *(Concluded)*

**The drift:** Picture a tight-knit group of normal ninth graders forced to kill one another or be killed…all for the home audience. Picked at random for "The Program," Battle Royale makes "The Running Man" look like The Price is Right.
**Bottom line:** Imagine the worst possible future and then multiply it by 100. Try not to look away though; it's masterfully illustrated.

## Sgt. Frog

**Story & Art:** *Santa Inoue* | **Rating:** *OT 16+*
**Genre:** *Action/Drama* | **Volumes to date:** *6*

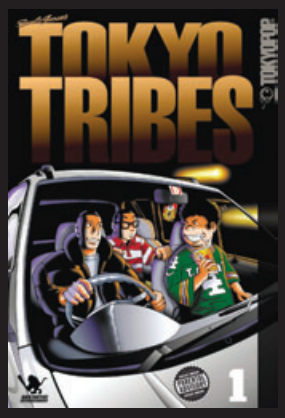
**The drift:** Fuyuki Hinata's dreams of bi-pedal alien frogs attacking the Earth turn out to be true when he discovers one of the invaders right under his (and his sister Natsumi's) nose. Cut off from the homeworld Sgt. Kerero (commanding officer of planet Keron's invasion force) soon finds behind enemy lines.
**Bottom line:** World domination is at hand…via talking frogs. What more could you possibly ask for?

## Et Cetera

**Story & Art:** *Tow Nakazaki* | **Genre:** *Action/Comedy*
**Rating:** *Y 10+* | **Volumes to date:** *7*

**The drift:** Et Cetera looks, tastes, and smells like the ultimate anime/video game hybrid from its wide-eyed star Mingchao to its seemingly endless tirade of over-the-top villains. All Mingchao wants is to be a star, but the road to Hollywood is paved with outlaws. Together with her companion Baskerville, a traveling priest on a secret mission, and her trusty Eto gun that fires bullets imbued with Zodiac animals, getting there is all the fun.
**Bottom line:** The Wild West has never looked so good or been so entertaining. One of the best action/comedies ever put to paper, Et Cetera is also extraordinarily vibrant and detailed making it one of the most beautiful looking manga out

## Tokyo Tribes




**The drift:** Tokyo Tribes merges hip-hop culture and gang warfare with Japanese storytelling… and they like it bloody. When The Hands, Saru, Wu-Ronz and Big Bubba go to war nothing is out of bounds. From massive orgies to unspeakable violence, TT is so crude it censors itself.
**Bottom line:** GTA and/or Saints Row fans: the line forms to your right.

**Story & Art:** *Santa Inoue* | **Rating:** *OT 16+*
**Genre:** *Action/Drama* | **Volumes to date:** *6*

## Kamiyadori

**Story & Art:** *Kei Sanbe* | **Genre:** *Action*
**Rating:** *M 18+* | **Volumes to date:** *2*

**The drift:** A biological disease that turns humans into vile abominations, the Kamiyadori plague is running rampant through the population. A special division of law enforcement; code name Right Arms keep track of the infected, exterminating any potential threats. Vivi likes to eat out of trash cans and parade around naked; her partner Rady teaches rookies within the Cathedral (HQ) between missions. Together they stand as the situation degrades as the virus spreads.
**Bottom line:** Kamiyadori is a true action/horror masterpiece.

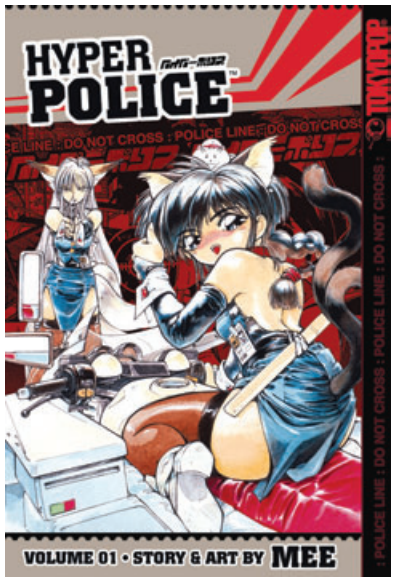
## Stone

**Story & Art:** *Hiromoto Sin-Ichi* | **Genre:** *Action*
**Rating:** *OT 16+* | **Volumes to date:** *1*

**The drift:** I love this book so much that I read it twice the day it arrived. Presented in "Mangascope," I'm not sure what that means, but the story does seem to mainline itself into your cerebral cortex as you scour this high adventure upon the great sand sea. Dune for a new age, Stone belongs on the silver screen. It's just that good.
**Bottom line:** This is one of thee most beautifully illustrated and visceral manga ever. Stone is the pinnacle of action-meets-sci-fi storytelling. Find it now.

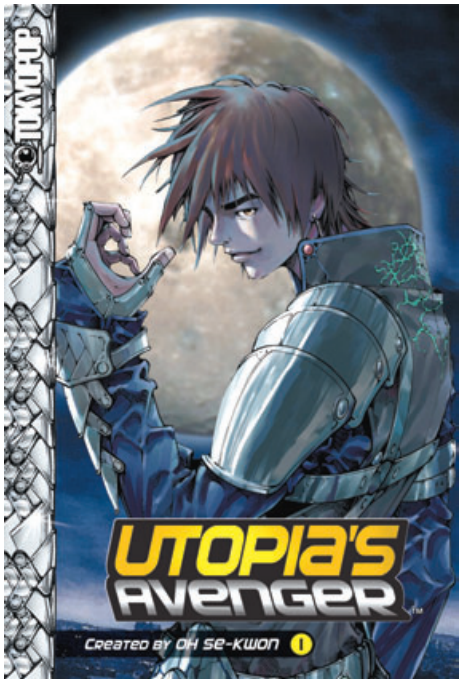
## Hyper Police

**Story & Art:** *MEE* | **Rating:** *OT 16+*
**Genre:** *Action/Comedy* | **Volumes to date:** *9*




The drift: In a world run by evolved beasts, humans aren't only endangered—they're on the menu. Only the Police Company can keep the peace, but these aren't your average cops. Ride along with cat girl Natsuki and her partner Sakura, a nine-tailed fox with an apatite for more than just justice.
Bottom line: Sexy, funny, and always on the go, Hyper Police practically reads itself. The most fun you can have reading.

# MANWHA




## Utopia's Avenger

**Story & Art:** *Oh Se-Kwon* | **Genre:** *Action*
**Rating:** *T 13+* | **Volumes to date:** *2*

**The drift:** Hong Gil-Dong created the ultimate utopia (the Kingdom of Yuldo) before mysteriously disappearing. Now he's back, but the place has gone to hell, quite literally.
Oh Se-Kwan marries martial arts, magic, monsters, technology, and humor, with one insanely sexy merchant's daughter as Gil-Dong returns—along with his partner Danu—to avenge his utopia.
**Bottom line:** If Utopia's Avenger had no words I'd want it for the art alone. The level of detail and shading is without equal and the character, creature, and vehicle design are absolutely stunning.

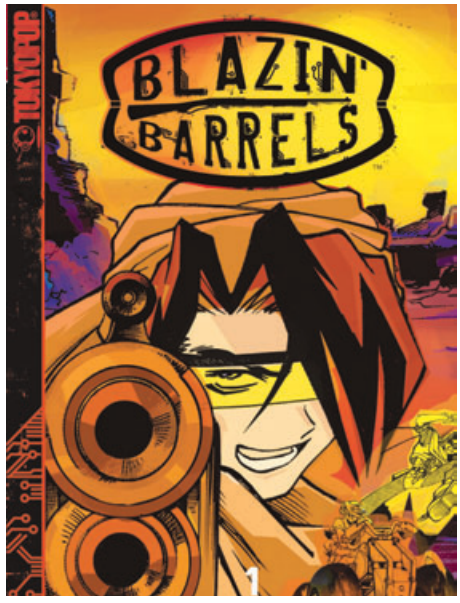
## Priest

**Story & Art:** *Min-Woo Hyung* | **Rating:** *OT 16+*
**Genre:** *Action/Horror* | **Volumes to date:** *16*

**The drift:** The Frontier of the American West meets the ultimate evil as servants of the fallen Archangel Temozarela prepare for his resurrection and with it humanity's demise. Only fallen priest Ivan Isaacs stands in their way. Lucky for us he sold his soul to the devil for the privilege.
**Bottom line:** Bathed in ritualistic carnage of the most unholy kind, Priest is not only action-packed but also stirs the soul with its gut-wrenching tale.

## Blazin' Barrels

**Story & Art:** *Min-Seo Park* | **Rating:** *Y 10+*
**Genre:** *Action/Comedy* | **Volumes to date:** *4*




**The drift:** The manga equivalent of a big summer action movie, Blazin' Barrels is sexy, snarky and so action-packed the pages all but smoke. Min-Seo Park's futuristic vision of the Old West is full of imagination. Combined with a bounty-hunting premise and a cast of ultra colorful characters, he paints a wildly entertaining adventure.
**Bottom line:** Try not to get too much popcorn grease on the pages; this here's one beautifully illustrated yarn.

## Death Jam

**The drift:** Killer on Killer assassination is at hand as legendary gun for hire Muchaca Smooth goes after a renegade hit man who's bringing chaos to the profession in the "hit or be hit" streets of Soul City.
**Bottom line:** This manga lives! Jeon Sang Young hangs it out there like a man possessed. You go a little crazy reading this one.

**Story & Art:** *Jeon Sang Young* | **Rating:** *OT 16+*
**Genre:** *Action* | **Volumes to date:** *1*

## PhD

**Story & Art:** *Son Hee-Joon* | **Genre:** *Fantasy/Comedy*
**Rating:** *T 13+* | **Volumes to date:** *9*

**The drift:** Countless anime and manga revolve around high-school drama but I only know of one where you can major in disemboweling… Sang attends Demon School Hades but education is the furthest thing from her mind. Her first order of business is "acquiring" a magical ring from the fiancée of the chief commander of hell. All becomes clear when she slips it on.
**Bottom line:** Irresistible character design, cheeky monsters and surprising depth puts PhD at the head of the class.

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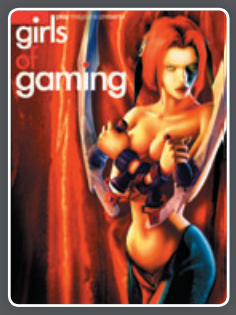

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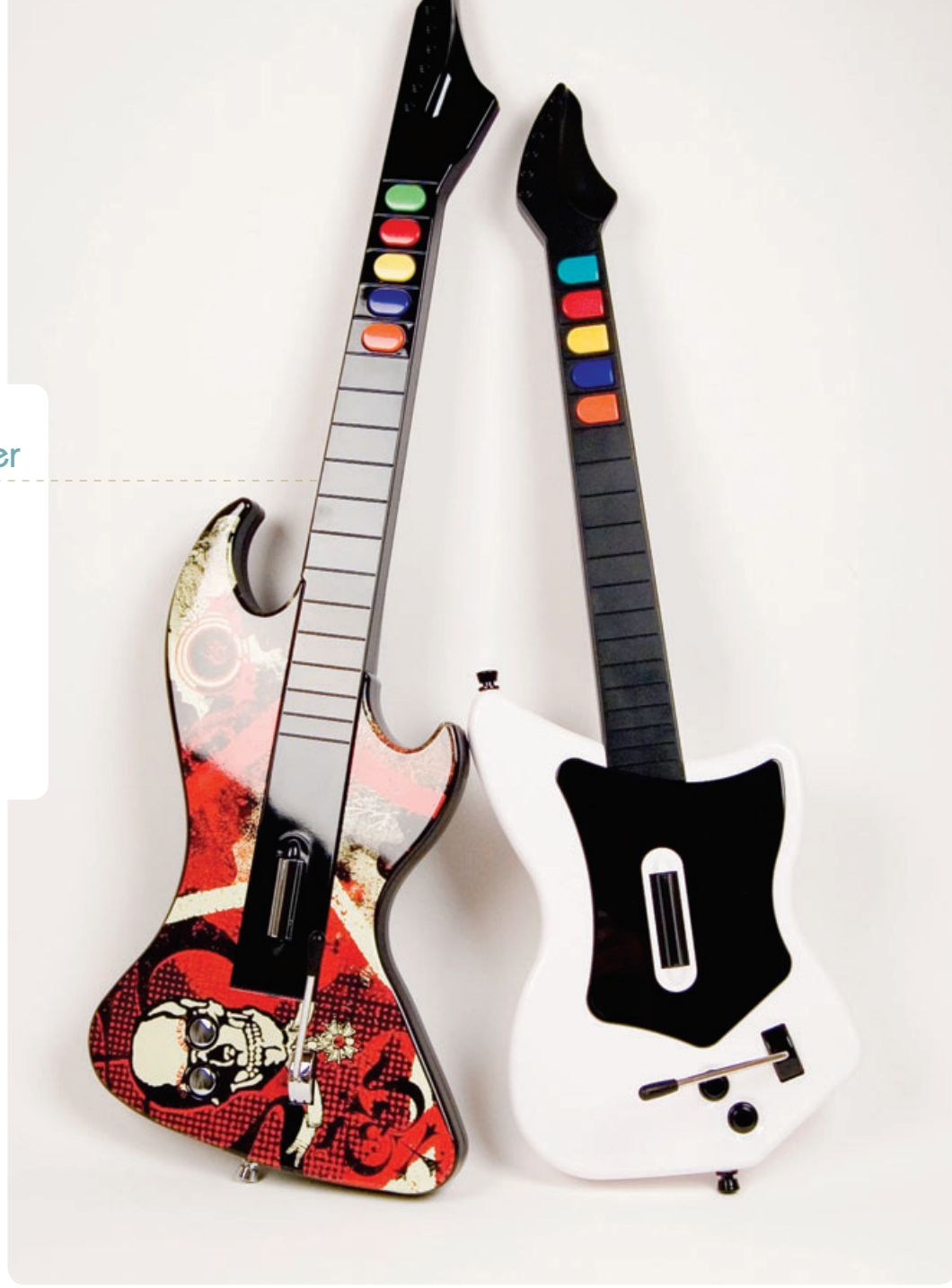
# gear

September 2007



Don't fear the Reaper!

## Reaper Wireless Guitar Controller

It's official: Guitar Hero has rewritten video game history. Where music games used to be as embarrassing as admitting you like American Idol (you poor entertainment- deprived soul), best performed behind triple-deadlocked doors, it's now cool to shred with your plastic axe. But we don't need no stinking wires! And what's with the stickers yo? Introducing the React Reaper: It's got a bitchin' skull with chrome eyes, features high-speed 2.4 GHZ wireless so powerful you can jam from 50 ft away—in case you happen to own a friggin' theatre—an oversized body, ambidextrous design and updated weight distribution so it feel like a real axe. Get your best Angus on dudes and dudettes! Hair metal wig not included.

React, 59.99

More than Meets the Eye

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## FragFX controller

More than just a controller, the FragFX is to the PS3 what the Wiimote and Nunchuk are to the Wii; maybe even better. By incorporating SIXAXIS movement in the left hand grip/analog with an optical mouse (that doubles as a tool for Home™ and Browser navigation) the FragFX introduces PC/Wii-style gameplay to the entire PS3 library, complete with programmable motion and mouse sensitivity. But the proof is in the playing. We guarantee, once you've gone Frag, you'll never go back. This is a seriously high-quality device that no PS3 gamer should be without.

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## Blade Runner: The Final Cut

**Directed by:** Ridley Scott
**Starring:** Harrison Ford, Rutger Hauer, Sean Young
**Released By:** Warner Bros.
**Rated:** R

to call *Blade Runner* one of cinema's best science fictions films would be an understatement to many of its fans. Director Ridley Scott's disturbing and breathtaking tale of a future world of human darkness and the replicants coiling through their space is a masterpiece of any genre.

On December 18, *Blade Runner* as you've never seen it before is upon us. For starters, you're gonna get the film fully remastered, and if you have the setup, available on Blu-Ray and HD-DVD so you can practically watch *BR* again for the first time.

The release comes on the heels of the 25th anniversary of *Blade Runner*, which has prompted Ridley Scott to toy with his original vision, adding in additional scenes of footage and reworking special effects. Extensive commentary will finally be recorded as well. All of this follows a theatrical run that will begin in New York and Los Angeles on October 5.

When *Blade Runner: The Final Cut* is released, you'll be given three options: a two-disc special edition; a four-disc collector's edition; and the definitive five-disc ultimate collector's edition, contained within a "Deckard Briefcase."

There's a vault full of extras being prepared beyond just the audio commentaries, involving Harrison Ford, Rutger Hauer, Sean Young and as many as 80 other talent and filmmakers from the movie. A 3.5 hour documentary prepared just for the DVD release will be available on all three editions, but if you opt for the more extensive collections, you'll get 45 minutes of deleted scenes, concept designs, background

info on some the finer details on the project, even a look at the original script—which was first called "Dangerous Days." All of this comes out of what Ridley Scott said meticulously began in early 2000.

A lot of content varies over the collection's that will be made available, but it's worth noting that with the Ultimate package, disc five will contain the workprint version of the film, which alters the opening scene, removes the Deckard narration until the end, cuts the unicorn and Deckard/Rachel hopeful ending, among other changes.

"To call Blade Runner one of cinema's best science fictions films would be an understatment to many of its fans."

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09_07 BRADY FIECHTER
EXECUTIVE EDITOR

# Ramblings of a tired E3 gamer

The biggest question I got asked at E3, other than where the best bars are in Santa Monica, was: "So, what are you playing right now?"

"Well," I said without hesitation, "the one game I'm obsessively playing right now, the one game that really does seem to light up my brain like a drug, is Pac-Man: Championship Edition. It's the best game of its kind since, since… It's just so freaking awesome play it now!"

"Oh, great, sure, I'll give it a shot," was the typical response, at which point the conversation went silent before leading to, "So, did you see Call of Duty 4?!"

No, seriously people, this new Pac-Man is something special, the kind of special that I haven't experienced so addictively in years. A completely classically spun game of pattern and twitch, the kind of mechanics that puts you in a frantic zone. It all leads to achieving a score, and I simply cannot stop until that score etches oh-so-gradually higher.

I can't think of the last time I played a game that accelerated my heart rate like Pac-Man: Championship Edition does, practically throwing me into a panicked state when the action gets so fast I almost can't accept that I'm still in control of the action. My gaming brain burns for this game, and I can't stop playing.

I wish more people got it. And I hope this is just the start of more games like this getting made, so more people do get it.

It would seem people don't get Calling All Cars, David Jaffe's manic ode to the good old NBA Jam days. Its style is infectious and keenly fun for what it's mean to accomplish, offering a high-energy fix of gameplay that is perfect for a late-night go on the PlayStation network. Or at least that's the way it would be if the world made sense, because it really doesn't make sense to me that this wildly enjoyable multiplayer game sometimes hasn't a single person online when I get on.

"I just don't get Calling All Cars, and I suck at it" said one developer, who also sucked at drinking his beer without having it dribble down his chin. I have to point that out because clearly his lack of coordination plays into the hate.

The hate continued when Ninja Gaiden came up. No one wanted to admit it, but it's kind of true: none of us really wants to play games that are that hard so much anymore. Especially not protracted 3D games. Credit part of that attitude to the increasing ability of games to immerse us more than artificially challenge us. I play to escape the ennui of life, just as with any form of entertainment, and teeth-clenching mechanical death marches simply don't resonate the same way anymore.

At least for me. What defines the best game is awfully nebulous. One of the most interesting after-hours debates at E3 surrounded The Darkness, a game that is aggressively divided. "I felt like the developers gave me the finger toward the end," said one writer who had plenty of convincing words to describe why the Darkness is crap.

"I felt like I was totally swept away, and I loved the ending," I responded. The developer beside me agreed, wisely pointing out that the choice to take control away from the player was deliberate and certainly debatable—and risky when you have a sect of gamers that want nothing but a gameplay experience, pure and true. (I say these same gamers don't realize or won't admit just how important the space is in which they play.)

We were reminded of Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath, when our hero is stripped of his earnings midway through the adventure. Some gamers cried fowl. I cried "yes!" when the metaphor played louder than the continuation of a prosaic gameplay device.

It's a tough balance, finding when to let story and world take charge and gameplay wait its turn. And I argue that the more convincing our worlds become, the more obvious traditional gameplay devices need to be rethought and redirected within the design.

The Darkness is not the best playing game; few would argue that. But it is tailored with such atmosphere and fitted with such extraordinary fabric of experience that the ending left me pleased. Certainly more pleased than many better playing games this year. I think that attitude partly comes down to the fact that very few games really do play that well, or at least with any distinction, and the best of what we get needs to be, and will be, better in time.

"Hey, somebody change the jukebox, he's playing the same song over and over!"

It's funny how much emotion can play into defining our favorite games, wherever that emotion flows from. As the conversation went forward, someone asked me what I thought were some of the best games from the past, curious as to my tastes. How true it is that we all fit into pretty specific categories of what we tend to like and dislike, based on a lot more than the tenuous belief that there is some absolute, subjective ruler to define what is good and what is not.

> "My gaming brain burns for this game, and I can't stop playing."

"I really loved Metroid, and of course Super Metroid; that spirit of adventure, that intricate maze of exploration and discovery. And I love the art of the Gothic, so no wonder I equally loved Symphony of the Night. And ICO… ICO defines what I see as the template for the perfect game. And talk about a game that had rough gameplay!"

If you asked me to rate my favorite games from the distant past, I'd first broadly reach for what I remember feeling while playing. Zelda felt right, and I do believe that it felt very right for a lot more reasons beyond what I was doing with the buttons.

I like how I feel when I play Pac-Man, I like where my brain is locked during the minutes I'm invested.

"It's really cool what you guys get to do," I said. "You get to intricately pattern out ways to make me feel that awesome gaming emotion and want to play in your sandbox. If you think about it, you're working as a god. Math is a big part of your material, the building blocks for a new life that grows and spreads into a functioning world."

"It's why we do what we do and believe in it so much…" said one developer.

Ah yes, the passionate discourse of men driven by E3 and alcohol.

But stay with me here. Is not part of the fun of being a gamer watching the life of technology in games evolving over the years? It began with primitive colors and shapes and ideas, which was amazing at the time. Then it became 16-bit, and it was again even more amazing. Then polygons, crude and barren, but still amazing. And now here we are, going into the second half of 2007, and I chuckle out how what I thought was once amazing is just not amazing any more.

But when I see Call of Duty 4, Resident Evil 5, Metal Gear 4 or any number of the new wave of games at E3, I am again amazed and reminded of the fun of watching worlds change and grow. It continues my excitement, despite the fact that all these games have 4s and 5s attached to their names.

It's a slow evolution, but we're getting there...

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